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“PROTECT MY MOMENT”:  
A CALL FOR AWARENESS OF AND ADVOCACY FOR THE WOUNDED CHILD

A DOCTORAL PROJECT  
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE  
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY  
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IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE  
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY

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## ABSTRACT

### **“Protect My Moment”: A Call for Awareness of and Advocacy for the Wounded Child**

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2015

The purpose of this project is to increase awareness of and advocacy for children of domestic violence in two Lutheran congregations in the Diocese of Borg, Norway, through education and mentoring. The project is a contribution to the development of a practical theology of advocacy and care for the wounded child. This study asserts that an increased awareness of and advocacy for suffering children is a central part of Christian discipleship.

This project calls for an advocacy by the Church, speaking for children who are not able to speak for themselves and empowering children's voices. According to this, two strategies have been developed and implemented. The strategies focus on strengthening the practice of infant baptism and Christian education as practices of advocacy and care.

The first strategy focuses on the churches' ministries with children, particularly in Christian education. A course with two parts was developed and tested. A preliminary analysis indicates that the course created an increased awareness of children of domestic violence and a new sensitivity of the role of the leader in children's ministry. Participants in the second part of the course reported that they need more tools to be able to advocate and care for children of domestic violence.

The second strategy focuses on the priests of the two participating congregations, and mentoring them as they talk with parents about the care and protection of their children. Preliminary feedback has been gathered in the form of verbal responses from the priests and questionnaires completed by parents who were visited by the priests. The results are promising. The pilot project and practice also evoked questions about the role of the priest, as well as limiting the conversation and goals for the conversation. These questions demonstrate the need for further studies.

Content Reader: Kara Powell, PhD

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To my wife Astrid and our three boys—thank you for who you are

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

### PART ONE: MINISTRY CONTEXT

INTRODUCTION	1
Chapter1. THE CHILD AS VICTIM OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN A NORWEGIAN COMMUNITY AND CHURCH CONTEXT	11

### PART TWO: THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

Chapter 2. LITERATURE REVIEW	32
Chapter 3. AN AWARENESS AND ADVOCACY THEOLOGY FOR THE WOUNDED CHILD	50

### PART THREE: PRACTICE

Chapter 4. GOALS AND PLANS	85
Chapter 5. IMPLEMENTATION PROCESS	102

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION	119
------------------------	-----

APPENDICES	126
------------	-----

BIBLIOGRAPHY	135
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PART ONE  
MINISTRY CONTEXT



## INTRODUCTION

This project will explore to hear what cannot be so easily heard, to believe what often cannot be seen, and as a church to respond with awareness and advocacy for children of domestic violence. All around the world children suffer from violence, poverty, destructive conflicts, and malnutrition. There are cries that can be heard but also cries that are not so easy to discover, trauma caused by parents or primary caretakers in which children are violated physically, psychologically, or sexually. Domestic violence is often a well hidden tragedy and a family secret. Psychologists describe it as a trauma of taboo.<sup>1</sup>

Violence in the family is often handled by negation and secrecy as part of the interaction in the family and in the society as well. This secrecy adds to the pain the children already experience when they feel alone and not allowed to share their stories with anybody. For some children their homes are not places of safety, trust, love, and protection, but are dangerous places to be, a kind of prison or battleground. Domestic violence is a difficult and confusing form of violence children are faced with. It is a huge paradox that those who are their primary caretakers are also the most dangerous and destructive people in their lives. The violence not only threatens and disturbs the physical and psychological development of children, but it also could limit their ability to connect to themselves, others, and God. In their relationships, they often have difficulty trusting

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<sup>1</sup> Unni Heltne and Per Øystein Steinsvåg, *Barn Som Lever Med Vold I Familien* (Oslo: Universitetsforl, 2011), 21.

others or God in terms of feeling loved or a sense of belonging. The neglect of a child often creates an identity marked by shame.<sup>2</sup>

Domestic violence is a problem that has received increased attention in Norway as a serious health problem. In 2014, the Government of Norway introduced a national plan for the prevention of domestic violence.<sup>3</sup> Through certain goal-oriented initiatives, the government will both increase efforts of preventing domestic violence and strengthen the support of those who are exposed to such violence. The conditions for children are given special attention. The goal is to respond with care, protection, and action when it is revealed that children are suffering from violation or that the parents lack the ability to give sufficient care and protection. It is a moral imperative for all as individuals, society, and church to act and respond when there is considerable reason to believe that something is wrong. For children living with domestic violence, the primary issue is that the violence has to stop immediately.

The purpose of this doctoral project is to increase awareness of and advocacy for children of domestic violence in two Lutheran congregations in the Diocese of Borg, Norway, through education and mentoring. There are several reasons for the need for increased awareness for children of domestic violence in the church. First of all, it is often not possible to tell who the children wounded by violation at home are. This could lead to the assumption that there are no such children among those who are participating in children's choir, Sunday classes, children's camp, or Christian education. But we have

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<sup>2</sup> Arne Blindheim, "Kronisk Traumatiserte Barn," in *Barn som Lever med Vold i Familien*, eds. Unni Heltne og Per Øystein Steinsvåg (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2011), 79.

<sup>3</sup> Justis og Beredskapsdepartementet, *Ett liv uten vold. Handlingsplan mot vold i nære relasjoner 2014-2017* (Oslo: Justis og Beredskapsdepartementet, 2013).

to assume that among a gathered group of children, there will often be somebody who is wounded and maybe afraid because of abuse or mistreatment by a parent or another relative. An increased awareness of children of domestic violence could also disturb a church that is too occupied with sharing the message in a way that forgets that an essential part of the message is to embrace and care for the least in Jesus' name. Roman Catholic thinker and theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar writes,

A child, therefore, is not merely a distant analogy for the Son of God: whoever turns with loving concern "to such a child" (any out of hundreds of thousands), and does this, consciously or unconsciously, in the name of Jesus, of one mind with him—that person in welcoming the archetypical Child who has his abode in the Father's bosom. And because this Child cannot be separated from his abode, whoever turns to the most insignificant of children is, in fact, attaining to the ultimate, to the Father himself.<sup>4</sup>

An increased awareness could also lead the local church to ask how the Gospel could contribute to the protection and healing of children.

Caring and advocating for all children is a necessary mark of a ministry that has the goal of contributing to the prevention of violence against children and to the care and healing of those who are wounded. This project is aware of that such a ministry will face obstacles. Norwegian child psychologist Magne Raundalen asks, "*Hvorfor kan historien om kampen for en bedre barndom, med et trygt liv for barn, best beskrives som en tung oppoverbakke, noen ganger til og med motvind?*"<sup>5</sup> Raundalen asserts two guideposts for an increased effort to reach the goal of providing for a safe childhood for every child.

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<sup>4</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Unless You Become Like This Child* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), 10.

<sup>5</sup> Magne Raundalen, "Barns Rett til et Trygt Liv," in *Barn som Lever med Vold i Familien*, eds. Unni Heltne og Per Øystein Steinsvåg (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2011), 254. The English translation of the quote is as follows: "Why can the history about the fight for a better childhood, with a safe life for children, best be described as a steep upward road, sometimes even with headwind?" This English translation and all those following are provided to aid the reader.

First, to strengthen the Child Welfare Department is important so that it might reach the homes and families where children are. Second, a larger transformation of society is needed. It is necessary to build stronger and more responsible local communities that mobilize people to report child suffering when it is discovered. This last guidepost is interesting for this project.

There is a general consensus in Norway that violence against children, whether it is deliberately used with pedagogic purpose or whether it is caused by uncontrolled aggression, should not be accepted. The Norwegian law on children's rights, *Barneloven* §30, makes it clear that all use of physiological or psychological violence against children is prohibited.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, there is resistance to talk about violence against children. The way children are handled is often considered a private matter.

Shame is another factor that presents an obstacle for parents to apply for help. It is very shameful to ask for help or admit that we have failed the task of sufficient care of our children. Advocacy is also about speaking out for those who are unable to speak for themselves. The smallest children, from newborn to age three, are particularly vulnerable as they have little to no language. In many situations, children are also forced to keep silent about what is happening at home.

This project bears in mind that violence against children primarily expresses a lack of capacity for respect and love for the child. Respect for children's bodies, minds,

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<sup>6</sup> Barne, likestillings og inkluderingsdepartementet, *Barneloven* §30 (Oslo: Barne, likestillings og inkluderingsdepartementet, 1981), [https://lovdata.no/dokument/NL/lov/1981-04-08-7/KAPITTEL\\_6#§30](https://lovdata.no/dokument/NL/lov/1981-04-08-7/KAPITTEL_6#§30) (accessed April 3, 2015).

thoughts, and spirituality are issues at stake in the relationship between adults and children and between the local church and children.

Respect starts with listening. This project will emphasize the ministry and discipline of listening to children and to God. Children can teach us about what it means to feel rejected and inferior to adults. Several of God's saving acts in the Bible start with God listening to the cry of a suffering human, like the story of Ishmael and Hagar in Genesis 21:17, and Jesus listening to the cries of Bartimaeus in Mark 10:49. The voices and the suffering of children of domestic violence are often well hidden. Especially if we are ruled by the tendency to think of the child, childhood, and the relationship between church and children in idyllic terms, it would be hard to take into account the suffering that might not be seen at all or discovered easily, or the deep questions and longing of children in regards to the Christian faith.

About twelve years ago, when I served as a youth minister, I had an encounter that provoked a new awareness in me of the emotions, faith questions, and life challenges that face children. This encounter served as a wake-up call in my ministry and started a process of which this project is a part. One December, the church service for all the kindergarteners had just finished. As youth minister, I was on my knees in the middle of our church talking to some of the children, when a five-year-old boy hit me gently on my shoulder and drew my attention. With a serious face he pointed to the altarpiece, a traditional picture which depicts the crucified Christ hanging dead on the cross with the blood dripping from his side. The boy asked, "Why does he hang there?"

The image had in some way disturbed him. I did not answer the boy's question with a common explanation of the atonement such as, "He died for our sin." I simply said

that it was really a good question. Without knowing it, the boy had just raised one of the most debated theological questions in the history of the Church. His voice evoked a renewed consciousness about the importance of hermeneutics and contextualization of the atonement and approaching the suffering and the cross of Christ with prayer as a mystery. But more than this, his question had evoked a new awareness of the importance of listening to the soul of children in ministry.

The boy's question caused me to wonder about what his eyes had seen both at home and in church. I wondered if our church could contribute to safety, healing, hope, trust, and faith for him and other children who were having a hard time. The voice of this five-year-old child continues to challenge and motivate me to truly listen to children and to ask what it means for individuals and churches to walk humbly with children and God in everyday life. His voice, and the voices and faces of some of the youth I served as a minister, is part of my motivation for addressing the problem of domestic violence. In the ministry of pastoral care I also often listen to adults who share their stories of a lost childhood. The pain and the scars people received as small children are extremely hard to heal, and sometimes it is impossible. To prevent violation and abuse of children at an early stage is crucial.

It is a moral imperative for the human community and especially the Church to hear and struggle to find ways to respond to this cry. It is about taking care of the least among us. Awareness and advocacy for children of domestic violence is about discipleship and being the Church of Christ with children. It is about how we can become advocates for those who are victims of domestic violence and how the Church can tend to the spiritual needs of children of domestic violence.

This project is part of a faith education project in Norway called *Beskytt øyeblikket*, which means, “Protect My Moment.” The project is taking place at *Diakonova*, a diaconal university college in Oslo where I serve, and it is sponsored by the Church Council of The Norwegian Church as part of developing a systematic and diaconal faith education for all baptized children between the ages of newborn and eighteen years of age. In 2013, *Diakonova* received a mandate and funds from the council of the Church of Norway for doing a three-year research project in connection with the faith education reform. The goal of the project is to increase Christian educators’ awareness of faith and life challenges among children of domestic violence, and to increase their ability to serve as educators in light of such challenges. This project also explores the possibility of the Church’s participation in the prevention of abuse and violence against children and care for those who suffer. In the project I will work together with fellow researchers.

The project implies two interventions in the congregations. First, a course is developed for professionals and volunteers in the congregations’ ministries to children, including Christian education ministries. The course provides knowledge and raises consciousness related to children who are experiencing abuse at home, and it encourages participants to consider how these abusive experiences affect both the children’s lives and their faith experiences. The course also provides the churches with some tools for how to care for children as part of Christian education and contribute to the prevention of child abuse.

Second, the project focuses on the communication that takes place when parents bring their children to church for baptism. This is probably the most controversial part of

the project. Together with therapists from the organization, *Alternativ til Vold*, which means “Alternative to Violence,” this project develops a method of speaking with parents about the care and protection of their children. This conversation is meant to include questions about the parents’ hopes, dreams, and fears related to the wellbeing and development of their children as part of their family. To include this kind of conversation as part of preparation or following up for infant baptism raises some questions that need theological deliberation. The project will explore if the conversation with parents before and after infant baptism is a good and effective place for introducing questions about ways of handling children. Both interventions will be evaluated, and both the priests and the parents involved will be interviewed.

The plan for Christian education in the Norwegian Church states that Christian education should strengthen the children’s and young people’s sense of their own worth and make it possible for them to perceive themselves and their world as created, loved, and sustained by the love of God.<sup>7</sup> Children of domestic violence have often so few experiences of being wanted and really loved. In this sense, the Church needs to consider what it takes to give such children experiences of love and respect.

There are several problems or challenges for a church that wants to be an advocate for children of domestic violence or tend to their spiritual needs. Some of these problems are caused by limits in understanding God’s mission and the role of the Church. This project is especially concerned about theological reflection as a foundation for the ministry initiatives. This includes careful consideration of the connection between God’s

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<sup>7</sup> The Church of Norway, National Council, *Plan for Christian Education in the Church of Norway* (Oslo: Kirkerådet, 2010), 16.



mission and the Church. As the children are given a central part in the redemptive reign of God, the relationship between God and children is also explored. The Church needs to cooperate with other organizations and institutions that work for the wellbeing and protection of children. At the same time, the Church should not undertake the role of the child care department, communal nurses, or the police, but should care for the children as the Church—that is, as a sign, foretaste, and witness about the coming kingdom of God. Awareness and advocacy for children of domestic violence could be understood as a concrete missional practice of the local church.

There is an important precondition in this project. From a Christian perspective, children should never be reduced to only being victims. Children should not be robbed of agency, as some therapeutic views have been criticized of doing.<sup>8</sup> The recent development of childhood sociology that takes children seriously as co-creators of their own childhood has challenged a unilateral view of children as passive victims.<sup>9</sup> Children are both agents and at the same time fundamentally dependent on responsible adults' care and protection. Children are the most vulnerable and often the most powerless in the context of domestic violence. The relation of power between a child and an adult could be described as asymmetric. The adult has more power and the responsibility in the relationship, but this does not mean that the child is without power or agency. Children of domestic violence are also agents, and are capable of making choices and influencing their situations. This precondition does not rule out the fact that many children of

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<sup>8</sup> Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, *Let the Children Come: Reimagining Childhood from a Christian Perspective* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003).

<sup>9</sup> Elisabeth Näsman, Åsa Källström Carter and Maria Eriksson "Perspektiver på Barns Stemmer om Vold," in *Barns Stemmer Om Vold: Å Tolke Og Forstå*, ed. by Maria Eriksson, Åsa Källström Carter, Gunilla Dahlkild-Öhmna, and Elisabeth Näsman (Oslo: Gyldendal akademisk, 2010), 22.

domestic violence experience their home life and their relationship to their parents as a prison, and have little chance of affecting their situation.

This project seeks to be a faithful response to God's redemptive reign and mission and the cry of suffering children. The child's right to a safe childhood and protection from abuse is one of the distinct signs of the kingdom of God as Jesus revealed it (Matthew 18:1-6). A call for awareness of and advocacy for children of domestic violence is a call for a new missional imagination, asking what it means to be a local church and to respond to God's mission to children in this particular time and place. It is important to ask what it means to respond to the cry of children of domestic violence as the Church. To answer this question we need to engage in an analysis of the context of ministry as a starting point for theological reflection about the Church's awareness of and advocacy for children of domestic violence.

## CHAPTER 1

### THE CHILD AS VICTIM OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN A NORWEGIAN COMMUNITY AND CHURCH CONTEXT

This chapter provides a foundation for the need of ministry initiative. First, this chapter presents an understanding of domestic violence as a phenomenon in human relationships and in a Norwegian context. The chapter then gives an account of domestic violence from a child's perspective and describes some of the consequences in a development perspective. It also explores some of the most important reforms and changes in the Church of Norway. The chapter ends with an exploration of some of the context of the ministry initiative, the congregations. Because the project is part of a research project, the names of the congregations are not mentioned to protect the anonymity of parents and priests who are interviewed in the project.

#### **Domestic Violence**

There are different understandings of what domestic violence is. To talk about violence as a phenomenon in the interactions between family members, it is necessary to discuss the meaning of the word *violence*. A Norwegian psychologist and researcher on violence, Per Isdal, writes that most people think about violence as “*en hver bruk av*

*fysisk makt for å skade andre*” (“every use of physical power to harm others”).<sup>1</sup> Isdal stresses the limitations of such an understanding. First of all, Isdal’s definition of violence excludes the fact that people who use violence do not always have the intention of doing harm. Some Christian leaders have argued for the need of physical punishment in the bringing up of children, and this is an example of why an extended perception of violence is necessary. This is one example of how violence has been accepted as reflecting a parent’s good intentions or even love.

To limit the definition of violence to being a use of physical power also excludes other expressions that are important for understanding the complexity of violence in a family. Violence could be psychological, material, sexual, and latent as well as physical. In families of domestic violence, the violence is often expressed in several of these forms. If we want to help victims and perpetrators of domestic violence, it is important to acknowledge the complexity in the life circumstances of such families. The slamming of a door does not need to be understood as a violent act, but for children exposed to domestic violence, such an act could be associated with former experiences of terror.

Isdal, who is eager to talk about violence in relation to power, argues for a wide definition of violence and suggests this: “*Vold er enhver handling rettet mot en annen person, som gjennom denne handlingen skader, smerter, skremmer eller krenker, får denne personen til å gjøre noe mot sin vilje eller slutte å gjøre noe den vil.*”<sup>2</sup> The strength of this definition is that it gives space for talking about violence both from the

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<sup>1</sup> Per Isdal, *Meningen Med Volden* (Oslo: Kommuneforlaget, 2000), 35.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 36. The English translation of the quote is as follows: “Violence is every act directed at another person that causes a wound, pains, frightens, hurts, or makes this person to do something against his or her own will or stop doing something he or she wills.”

perspective of what it causes and what it is supposed to create. Often family violence can be described as a functional act of power. The mother tears apart the new doll of her little daughter who does not want to sleep. Or the father hits the mother when he discovers that she has been talking to somebody he does not know on the telephone. The violent act is based on a feeling of powerlessness, and violence is used to take control, regain power in the situation, and create fear. The constant fear that violence can create forces victims to develop strategies to behave in ways that might prevent aggression.

The Council of Europe defines domestic violence as “any act or omission committed within a family by any of its members that prejudices the life, the physical or psychological integrity or the liberty of that family member and that seriously harms the development of his/her personality.”<sup>3</sup> This definition is especially interesting in connection with this project when it directly refers to a person’s psychological integrity, personality, and development. Children are at a stage of development that is especially vulnerable, and violence can result in wounds that they will carry for their entire lives.

There are different forms of domestic violence. Children witnessing violence between their father and mother is quite a new issue of research and area of knowledge.<sup>4</sup> There is a growing consensus among researchers and therapists that the detrimental effects upon a child who witnesses one parent being a target of violence could be extensive.<sup>5</sup> Researchers also show that children in families where the mother is beaten by

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<sup>3</sup> Heltne and Steinsvåg, *Barn Som Lever Med Vold I Familien*, 19-20.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>5</sup> Caroline Øverlien, “The Children of Patriarchal Terrorism,” *Journal of Family and Violence* 28 (April 2013): 277.

the father are themselves also at risk of being exposed to violence by either the mother or the father.<sup>6</sup>

In their book, *Domestic Violence and Child Protection*, Catherine Humphreys and Nicky Stanley write, “Domestic violence is typically not about one-off incidents of actual violence but a sustained pattern of abusive behaviors and attitudes and attitudes that may escalate over time.”<sup>7</sup> Children can tell about certain actions of their fathers or mothers that created an atmosphere of fear and put them in a position of always being watchful. They think, “Is he getting angry now or could we be safe?” If we want to build increased awareness of the life challenges of children of domestic violence, we need to listen to their voices.

#### Domestic Violence from a Child’s Perspective

British social scientist Audrey Mullender asserts that it was first in 1994 that researchers began to listen to the voices of children speaking directly about domestic violence.<sup>8</sup> Up to that point, she writes, children had not been regarded as reliable to bear witness to what really took part in families. The issue is similar in a Norwegian context. It has only been in the last twenty years that children’s own stories and opinions about violence have been communicated through research books and articles. Some researchers have shown that when parents and children are being asked if they have experienced

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Catherine Humphreys and Nicky Stanley, *Domestic Violence and Child Protection: Directions for Good Practice* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2006), 655, Kindle.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 616.

violence at home, more children than mothers will say they have experienced violence.<sup>9</sup> This demonstrates the fact that it is important to talk with children about how they experience interaction in the family. However, talking with children about violence raises several ethical dilemmas that need to be considered.<sup>10</sup>

Children are also in general very loyal to their parents. If they are told to keep silence about incidents at home, they will most often keep the secret. As one child said, “*Mamma og pappa lagde meg om til en hemmelighetsmaskin,*” which means, “My mum and dad transformed me into a machine of secrets.”<sup>11</sup> The secrecy is one of the painful elements of the situation for children exposed to violence at home. Instead of being able to talk with someone about the trauma, the child is left alone with the terror and pain.

Researches report that children who experience domestic violence are afraid, but the fear of being left is often stronger than the fear of the violence.<sup>12</sup> Since they cannot trust the adults, they try to behave in ways that will prevent violence. The children will sometimes even blame themselves for the violence or the tragedy of the situation. They believe that their parents would not be violent if only they had been “better” children. Focusing on the emotional state of their parents can keep them from seeing their own

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<sup>9</sup> Åsa Källström Carter and Carolina Överlien, “Ethiske dilemmaer i kvalitativ forskning med barn som har opplevd vold,” in *Barns Stemmer Om Vold: Å Tolke Og Forstå*, eds. Maria Eriksson, Åsa Källström Carter, Gunilla Dahlkild-Öhmna, and Elisabeth Näsman (Oslo: Gyldendal akademisk, 2010), 34.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Aschjem Øyvind and Wenche Sanna Tobiassen, eds., *Ikke Lenger Alene—Veileder I Gruppebehandling Av Barn Som Lever Med Vold I Familien* (Oslo: Alternativ til Vold, 2009), 14.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 15.

needs and feelings.<sup>13</sup> This is one of many factors that make it so difficult to discover children who suffer from domestic violence.

### The Extent of Domestic Violence in Norway

It is not easy to estimate the percentage of children who experience domestic violence in Norway. In 2007 there was done a study in Norway to estimate the extent of children's experience of violence in the family.<sup>14</sup> A total of 7033 pupils in secondary school were asked about violence at home. Of these, 8 percent said they had experienced brutal violence from one of their parents and 2 percent reported having experienced brutal violence from both parents.<sup>15</sup> Unni Heltne and Per Øystein Steinsvåg refer to a study done in Sweden which estimates that 10 percent of all children have experienced violence at home, half of these citing that the violence occurred often; additionally, 1 percent has experienced extreme violence.<sup>16</sup> No matter how many reports there are on the extent of domestic violence, it is reasonable to assume that a considerable number of children have been exposed to serious physical or psychological violence.

### Increased Focus on the Prevention of Domestic Violence

The government's efforts to prevent domestic violence have increased in the last several years. Violence against children or the use of corporal punishment in childrearing

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Svein Mossige and Kari Stefansen. *Vold og Overgrep mot Barn og Unge – En Selvrporteringsstudie Blant Avgangselever i Videregående Skole* (Oslo, NOVA rapport 20, 2007), 10.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Unni Heltne and Per Øystein Steinsvåg, "Begrepsavklaringer og Oversikt" in *Barn som Lever med Vold i Familien*, ed. by Unni Heltne og Per Øystein Steinsvåg (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2011), 26.



was prohibited by Norwegian penal law in 1972. The law was sharpened in 2010 by the Norwegian Parliament. In 2014 the government introduced a four-year plan to prevent and stop domestic violence and to increase effective help for those who are victims of such violence.<sup>17</sup> Children are given special attention in the plan. The government takes measures to increase knowledge about domestic violence among all who are in public positions working with children. The plan also stresses collaboration between voluntary organizations and institutions working for children and the child care department. In addition, every local council is encouraged to work out local plans for handling and preventing domestic violence. Both of these efforts are of special interest to this project.

Often children do not even know that they are being exposed to violence in their families.<sup>18</sup> Children tend to think that whatever they are experiencing must be what everyone else is experiencing as well. A girl who had grown up in a violent home wrote that schools should do more to teach children about what is normal behavior.<sup>19</sup> Concrete responses to this challenge have been made. Many primary schools have introduced a program for fifth graders in which the pupils are shown the animated movie, *Sinna Mann*, about a boy who lives in a violent home.<sup>20</sup> After the film a careful conversation is introduced where the pupils are given space to share some of their responses and questions that the film might have evoked.

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<sup>17</sup> Justis-og Politidepartementet, *Et Liv Uten Vold: Handlingsplan Mot Vold I Nære Relasjoner 2014-2017* (Oslo: Justis-og politidepartementet, 2013).

<sup>18</sup> Humphreys and Stanley, *Domestic Violence and Child Protection*, 683.

<sup>19</sup> Monica Borg Fure and Gry Stordahl, *Spor Fra Virkeligheten* (Oslo: Redd Barna, 2009).

<sup>20</sup> *Sinna Mann* (“Angry Man”), directed by Anita Killi et al., Norsk filminstitutt, 2010.

## Domestic Violence and Its Damaging Effects upon Children

There is overwhelming documentation of the damaging effects of children living in an unsafe home.<sup>21</sup> Continuous domestic violence often causes long-lasting trauma for children, and is more dangerous than single traumatic events.<sup>22</sup> Both retro-perspective and pro-perspective studies demonstrate that to live with continuous violence in the family causes trauma and often leads to aggressiveness, disorganized attachment, self-damaging behavior, and reduced health, both in childhood and in adulthood.<sup>23</sup> Authors like Alice Miller and Bessel Van Der Kolk have shown the connection between childhood trauma and mental illness in adults.<sup>24</sup> In her book, *The Body Never Lies*, Miller demonstrates how the parents' violence toward or mistreatment of young children becomes stored in the body of the child.<sup>25</sup> Van Der Kolk asserts that abuse of children represent the largest and most costly public health issue in the United States.<sup>26</sup> This section explores some of the effects that domestic violence can have on a child's development. In particular, it provides insights from recent neurobiological research

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<sup>21</sup> Magne Raundalen, "Barns Rett til et Liv i Trygghet," in *Barn som Lever med Vold i Familien—Grunnlag for Hjelp og Beskyttelse*, ed. by Unni Heltne and Per Øystein Steinsvåg (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget 2011), 254.

<sup>22</sup> Magne Raundalen, "Familievold og Barns Utvikling—Kunnskap fra Forskning og Praksis," in *Barn som Lever med Vold i Familien—Grunnlag for Hjelp og Beskyttelse*, ed. by Unni Heltne and Per Øystein Steinsvåg (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget 2011), 47.

<sup>23</sup> Hanne Ceceilie Brarud and Magne Raundalen, "Familievold og Barns Utvikling: Kunnskap fra Forskning og Praksis," in *Barn som Lever med Vold i Familien*, ed. by Heltne and Steinsvåg (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2011), 42.

<sup>24</sup> Alice Miller, *The Body Never Lies: The Lingering Effects of Hurtful Parenting* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2005), Kindle; Bessel A. Van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score* (New York: Viking, 2014), Kindle.

<sup>25</sup> Miller, *The Body Never Lies*, Loc. 203, Kindle.

<sup>26</sup> Van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, Loc. 2276, Kindle.

which demonstrates how vulnerable children are in their first year of life and how domestic violence might affect the functions and growth of the brain.

### Domestic Violence—Effects on the Development of the Brain

It is agreed upon by many researchers and therapists that domestic violence can potentially have dramatic consequences for the brain's development and social, cognitive, emotional, and behavioral function.<sup>27</sup> These consequences may, among other factors, depend on age of the child, when he or she experiences the trauma, and the length of time the child lives in a situation of domestic violence. Recent neurobiological research has revealed some of the effects of traumatic stress on the growth and development the brain. Small children are especially vulnerable due to the fact that the brain and the neurologic system are in rapid change and growth in the first years of one's life.<sup>28</sup> Psychologist Arne Blindheim gives an overview of some the findings from recent neurobiological research that reveals the connection between trauma and damage to the development of the brain in early childhood.<sup>29</sup> The brain will adjust to its environment, which implies that a brain that grows in an environment of violence, abuse, and fear will adjust to this situation to be able to protect itself from danger.

Blindheim notes that the brains of traumatized children tend to be more developed on the right side than the left, which means that they are more directed by emotional

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<sup>27</sup> Hanne Ceceilie Brarud and Magne Raundalen, "Familievold og Barns Utvikling: Kunnskap fra Forskning og Prakis," in *Barn som Lever med Vold i Familien*, ed. by Heltne and Steinsvåg (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2011), 41.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>29</sup> Arne Blindheim, "Hvordan Traumatisering Påvirker Hjernen," in *Barn som Lever med Vold i Familien*, ed. by Heltne and Steinsvåg (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2011), 51.

responses than by rational thinking.<sup>30</sup> In addition to this, the parts of the brain that should integrate the two sides are often damaged.<sup>31</sup> Trauma may affect the development of the *hippocampus*, which is the part of the brain that functions to differentiate between what is dangerous and what is safe.<sup>32</sup> Trauma may also speed up the impulses from the *amygdale*, which functions as a central place for sending messages of alarm.<sup>33</sup> The result is that children who are traumatized will have a high sense of readiness, being watchful of danger. These children can strongly react when they are triggered by voices or movements that they associate with danger, even when they are in a safe environment.

#### Domestic Violence and Behavioral, Socio-Emotional, Cognitive, and Physiological Development

It is common to discuss the child's emotional and behavioral problems caused by violence in terms of either internalization or externalization. Internalization could be expressed by being oversensitive, uneasy, or inhibited by severe sadness, anxiety, or withdrawal. Externalization consists of uncontrolled, antisocial, or aggressive behavior.

Domestic violence may result in a lack of behavioral control. This could cause self-destructive behavior as well as aggression towards others. Bad behavior leads to negative attention, which makes the situation for these children even harder. They are not safe in themselves and they do not trust others. Self-destruction and isolation may be a strategy the traumatized child will choose. Keeping up with rules becomes difficult.

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

Sleeping disturbances, eating disorders, or pathological self-soothing behaviors are also symptoms found among children of domestic violence.

Domestic violence may also hinder the development of a child's relational capacity. The quality of attachment the child develops reflects the parents' capacity for availability for the child, for tolerating the child's reactions, and for regulating the child's emotion.<sup>34</sup> Instead of developing a safe attachment, the infant exposed to violence by parents or others who are relationally close could develop an unsafe and possibly an unsafe-disorganized attachment. The world becomes an unpredictable and dangerous place. It becomes difficult for the child to be attuned to other people's emotional state. People are distrusted and it is difficult to think about others as friends or allies. This way of relating to people can lead to social isolation.

Children of domestic violence are often given little help in regulating their affections. At the same time, as they are induced to strong negative affects by parents, they are not allowed to show their own emotional reactions.<sup>35</sup> This makes it very difficult for these children to learn to regulate their affections, and it can make it difficult for the child to describe his or her own feelings.

When the child experiences something that he or she cannot integrate, there is a possibility of developing a dissociative structure in his or her personality. Seeing the father beating and screaming at one's mother, or being hit by one's own mother, exceeds the child's capacity for integration. The incident becomes a closed memory. Children

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<sup>34</sup> Stig Torsteinson, "Små Barn Utsatt for Familie vold. Fokus på Diagnose, Psykobiologi, og Tilknytningspsykologi," in *Barn som Lever med Vold i Familien*, ed. by Heltne and Steinsvåg (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2011), 67.

<sup>35</sup> Blindheim, "Kronisk Traumatiserte Barn," 79.

may treat different parts of the bodies like they have their own identities.<sup>36</sup> Another expression of dissociation could be amnesia or forgetfulness. The neglect or prohibition of the child's feelings by the parent will also contribute to disassociation.

Domestic violence can also cause a child to experience a lack of a fundamental sense of self and of being separated from the mother or father. A low self-esteem and feelings of shame are other symptoms or results of violence. The child might think and feel that he or she is the reason for the violence and that he or she needs to be punished.

Living under the circumstances of domestic violence may also affect the child's cognitive development. This can express itself in a whole range of areas, generally making it difficult for the child to learn. Lack of focus, concentration, and lasting curiosity, as well as problems with language development slow down the child's learning.

Domestic violence can also affect the development of the body. The child may become hypersensitive to physical contact or he or she may not being able to feel pain. Other effects could be problems with coordination, balance, or body tone. Blindheim mentions a wide span of medical problems like asthma, skin problems, autoimmune disorders, and so on.<sup>37</sup>

All that has been mentioned here shows how complex the effects of domestic violence and abuse can be for children. The situation where domestic violence happens is also often complex. In families of domestic violence, there are often other risk factors such as alcoholism, unemployment, or economic stress.<sup>38</sup> To create a simple schema of

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>37</sup> Blindheim, "Kronisk Traumatiserte Barn," 76.

<sup>38</sup> Braarud and Raundalen, "Familievold og Barns Utvikling," 50.

cause and effect is therefore not possible, state Braarud and Raundalen. Some children of domestic violence develop well despite violence. The result depends on many different factors.<sup>39</sup> They assert that future research on how children function in families of domestic violence should use children themselves as informants.<sup>40</sup>

### Domestic Violence—A Threat to Faith and Spirit

Beyond the threat to a child's physical, cognitive, and psychological development, another dimension of importance is the effect of domestic violence on the spiritual wellbeing and development of the child. Youth who have received help and have started on the way to recovery tell about searching for hope and meaning. One of the distinct results of violence is that it can rob children of a sense of meaning, hope, and trust in God. The violence is especially dangerous for the child when it is given a religious justification. It is possible that an image of God as violent and wrathful could come to dominate their identity.

To experience delight, meaning, awareness of being, trust, wonder, and awe—these are all expressions of a child's spirituality.<sup>41</sup> Violence not only brings physical or psychological destruction to a child, but it also affects the child's capacity for self-transcendence, for receiving love and experiencing a sense of belonging, and for trust in God. In her book on pastoral care and spiritual direction, Jean Stairs reserves one chapter for the ministry of listening to the souls of children. She writes,

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> David Hay, *The Spirit of the Child* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2006), 63-78.

Children may have different reactions to the stresses and conflicts of their lives, but they do feel them. And if their feelings, losses, and fears are not expressed or dealt with in a clear and sensitive manner, then these will continue to affect their relationships, their relationship with God, and their ability to cope with the world later in life. Congregations are stewards of the mysteries of children in their midst.<sup>42</sup>

Stairs also calls congregations to take more seriously the child's own potential to develop a living and bonded relationship with God.<sup>43</sup> A question of importance in this project is how such a respect for child spirituality in Christian education could contribute to hope and faith for children who have been exposed to domestic violence.

### **The Church of Norway—A Time of Transition and Reform**

A long process of reform, in which the power has been moved from the State to the Church in order to let the Church rule its own house, has taken place via changes to the Constitution. Beginning in 2012, the king is no longer part of the Church's rule, and he no longer holds Church cabinet meetings. Still, the Church wants to have a close relationship to the people of Norway and it wants to be an open, free, and evangelizing Church.<sup>44</sup> One of the questions being asked in this time during which the bonds between State and Church are changed is how this is going to influence people's sense of belonging related to the Church and membership. Today, about 76 percent of the people of Norway belong to the Church of Norway. The changed relationship has unfortunately so far not evoked strong conversation about mission and ecclesiology.

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<sup>42</sup> Jean Stairs, *Listening for the Soul: Pastoral Care and Spiritual Direction* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 161.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.

<sup>44</sup> The term for *evangelizing* used in the Church of Norway is *misjonerende*, which is not the same as *missional*. The term implies that mission is an activity or a ministry and does not say much about ecclesiology.



There are three relatively new documents being used within the Church of Norway that will be discussed in this project: the Plan for Christian Education, the Plan for *Diakonia* in the Church of Norway, and the new Liturgy of Baptism. These documents are important to this project and need to be considered, as all three could potentially inform the issue of advocacy for children of domestic violence.

#### A Diaconal Faith Education—The Plan for Christian Education (2009)

The greatest ongoing reform in the Church of Norway is the Christian education reform that took place between 2004 and 2008, and included experimentation locally, research projects, and national conferences. The result of the project was a national plan for faith education reform that was passed by *Kirkemøtet 2009*, the Church Meeting, which is the basic document for developing local plans for faith education.<sup>45</sup> The Norwegian parliament has decided to provide financially so that by 2014 every congregation in the Church of Norway should be part of the reform.

One premise of the plan is that every congregation shall develop a local plan based on the national plan. The plan itself states, “The aim of the Plan for Christian Education is to contribute to a systematic and continuous Christian Education that awakens and strengthens Christian faith, imparts knowledge of the Triune God, helps in interpreting life and mastering the art of living, and encourages interest and involvement in the life of the church and the community.”<sup>46</sup> The expressions “interpreting life” and “mastering the art of living” are interesting in connection with this project. When

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<sup>45</sup> The Church of Norway, National Council, *Plan for Christian Education in the Church of Norway* (Oslo: Kirkerådet, 2009).

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

presenting the overall goals of interpreting life and mastering the art of living, the plan also states, “Christian education should strengthen the children’s and young people’s sense of their own worth and make it possible for them to perceive themselves and their world as created, loved and sustained by the love of God.”<sup>47</sup> Increasing awareness of and advocacy for children of domestic violence could be a necessary step on the way to reach this goal or purpose. This is about developing a diaconal faith education for children.

The Christian education reform determines a lot in terms of how a local church spends its time and what ministries it focuses on. Congregations in Norway are currently working on how to implement the plan. They are seeking to develop a continuous education program for children and adolescents that reflects both this new national plan, with its understanding, goals, and visions, as well as the local context.

### *The Plan for Diakonia (2007)*

In 2007 the Church Council passed a new *Plan for Diakonia* in the Church of Norway. The plan gives expression of the Gospel not just as something that has happened in the past, but as something that works in our world today: “*Diakonia* is the caring ministry of the Church. It is the Gospel in action and is expressed through loving your neighbor, creating inclusive communities, caring for creation and struggling for justice.”<sup>48</sup> This definition gives some very interesting expressions that both legitimate and focus on the purpose of this project. The mention of struggling for justice connects with the development of advocacy for children. Even more poignant is the very core of what

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>48</sup> Church of Norway, The National Council, *Plan for Diakonia* (Oslo: Kirkerådet, 2007), 5.

*diakonia* is said to be: “the Gospel in action.” It is a common idea that *diakonia* is just a part of what the Church does. It is like evangelism and mission, something for those who are particularly interested in a part of the church’s ministry. The *Plan for Diakonia* stresses that *diakonia* is part of the essence of being the Church.<sup>49</sup> The diaconal nature of the Church is expressed on all levels in the Church. It is also a dimension of the Christian faith that finds expression in liturgy, preaching, education, and ministry with children and adolescents.

The *Plan for Diakonia* also states, “It is our responsibility both as individuals and a community to speak up when there is suspicion of violence and harassment.”<sup>50</sup> This line clearly speaks of the moral imperative to care and to speak when people are exposed to violence. This will require courage both as a fellowship and as individual workers in the Church.

#### *The New Liturgy of Baptism (2011)*

In the Church of Norway, the liturgy is the expression of the Church’s faith. In 2011, the Church Council passed a new liturgy of baptism. This new liturgy was part of a church service reform that sought to allow for local variation of the liturgy.

In light of this project, there are some interesting changes. The most interesting change for this project in this liturgy of baptism is the statement about the common responsibility for the child’s faith education. This statement will serve as a starting point for increasing awareness of and advocating for children of domestic violence. The liturgy

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 22.

states, “*Dere er vitner om at NN/dissee er døpt med den kristne dåp. Sammen med vår menighet og hele kirken har dere fått del i et hellig ansvar: å vise omsorg for henne/ham/dem, be for henne/ham/dem, og hjelpe henne/ham/dem til å bruke Guds ord og delta i den hellige nattverd, så hun/han/de kan leve og vokse i den kristne tro.*”<sup>51</sup> This new text is interesting for two reasons.

First, this change exhorts a heightened focus on caring for the wellbeing of children as a common and central Christian practice of the local church. The new liturgy mentions caring for children as an element of shared holy responsibility. The Norwegian expression is *vise omsorg*, which means “to show care,” for the child being baptized. The text does not say anything more about what this care is about or the limits or context of this care. But it certainly gives a foundation to start a new conversation in church about what it is to care for the children as the Church. A fresh reflection about infant baptism as a practice of care is an appropriate interpretation of this addition to the liturgy.

The second change in this addition to liturgy that is interesting for this project is about using the name of the child in the beginning. In the new liturgy, the priest uses the name of the child before he or she mentions the mandate given by Jesus for baptism. The use of the child’s name in the direct address to the infant strengthens the child as full subject and human being worthy of respect.

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<sup>51</sup> Church of Norway, National Council (2011), <http://kirken.no/nb-NO/daap/dapsliturgien/> (accessed April 1, 2015). The English translation of the quote is as follows: “You are witnesses that (name/s) is baptized with the Christian baptism. Together with our congregation and the whole Church, you have been given share in a holy responsibility: to care for her/him/them, pray for her/him/them and help her/him/them to use the word of God and participate in the holy Communion, so that she/he/they might live and grow in the Christian faith.”

## **Special Local Features in the Community of the Pilot Project**

The project includes two congregations in the Diocese of Borg. Due to the need to protect the anonymity of parents and priests who will be interviewed, the names of the congregations are not mentioned. The congregations are described as Congregation A and Congregation B.

### **Demographics**

Both Congregation A and Congregation B are located in suburbs of the capital of Norway, which is Oslo. The municipality of Congregation A has experienced slow population growth, under the average in Norway, while the municipality of Congregation B has experienced rapid growth.<sup>52</sup> Both congregations belong to communities with a high percent of children. Children between the ages of newborn and eighteen years of age constitute about 25 percent of the total number of inhabitants in these communities.

A difference between the congregations is that while Congregation B belongs to a community that has a large population of immigrants, Congregation A belongs to a community that has a small population of immigrants. Congregation A is in a community in which higher education is above the average in Norway. The percentage of children under eighteen who live in low-income families is fewer than the national average.

### **Special Features of the Congregations**

The election of congregations for this project was based on certain criteria. Both congregations baptize more than thirty infants each year. They have three priests, both

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<sup>52</sup> For the facts on demographics, I have used the public health profiles that are published every year. See Folkehelseinstituttet, "Folkehelseprofil," <http://www.fhi.no/helsestatistikk/folkehelseprofil> (accessed April 3, 2015).

male and female, in each congregation. The congregations each have a leader for Christian education and have developed local plans for a systematic Christian education between the ages of newborn and eighteen. A mark of both congregations is the focus on equipping and using young leaders in the churches' children's ministries.

The contact with the congregations also reveals that these congregations have developed a practice of gathering parents at church some days or weeks ahead of infant baptism to talk with them about the theology of baptism and share practical information about the ceremony and the program of Christian education. This practice has replaced the traditional practice of a visit by one of the priests to the child's home before infant baptism. This new practice provided the most challenging contextual feature for this project. The development of this new practice also represents a challenge for the diocese of Borg and will probably become a topic of discussion in the near future.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter has focused on the need for awareness and advocacy related to the effects of domestic violence upon children. It has also presented the some of the context of the two pilot congregations. The next chapter presents some of the main literary resources for this project, which discuss the relationship between God and the child, the Church and the child, the family and the child, and the mission of God and the child.

PART TWO

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter will present and discuss six written resources that have been chosen to inform this project and be critical to the theological considerations of this project. The chapter is divided into three sections. The first section addresses the perception and status of the child in church and theology. The second section focuses on the missiology and ecclesiology of children. The third section discusses a practical theology of care and advocacy for suffering children.

#### **The Perception and Status of the Child in Church and Theology**

In this section, the status of children and childhood in theology and the Church is discussed. Two works are presented here: “The Child in Luther’s Thought,” by Jane E. Strohl, and *Graced Vulnerability: A Theology of Childhood*, by David H. Jensen. The first work, which focuses on Luther’s theology and sayings, is deliberately chosen due to the church context of this project. Jensen’s work is chosen because it develops a practical theology of care and advocacy for vulnerable children based on theological considerations of humans being created in the image of God.



“The Child in Luther’s Theology,” Jane E. Strohl

Searching our own historical heritage to rediscover thoughts and teaching that may bring light to our own situation is both advisable and necessary. Digging in the history of our own heritage helps us to understand ourselves better. It also helps us to become aware of habits that do not any longer serve the purpose of expressing the Gospel of Christ but have simply become part of traditionalism.

In her essay, “The Child in Luther’s Theology,” Jane E. Strohl quotes Luther when he asks, “For what purpose do we older folks exist, other than to care for the young?”<sup>1</sup> The call to care for children was given a central position in Luther’s description of Christian life. Luther’s primary perspective was that of children in relationship with their parents. He considered children to be objects of care, and he contended that it is the obligation of the parents and the society to provide children with teaching which will raise them to be good Christian citizens. Although Luther was a strong defender of child baptism, he did not develop teaching about childhood and the status of children as members of the Christian community.

Strohl mentions Luther as the theologian of paradoxes. His slogan, *simul iustus et peccator*, which means, “simultaneously righteous and sinful,” is a distinctive feature of Lutheran faith. Luther acknowledged that the Christian is righteous before God through Christ, but is at the same time a sinner in this world. Strohl does not make an assessment of the value of Luther’s theology of paradox for the faith of children and their protection and wellbeing. The paradox of *simul iustus et peccator* could provide an opportunity to

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<sup>1</sup> Jane E. Strohl, “The Child in Luther’s Theology: ‘For What Purpose Do We Older Folks Exist, Other Than to Care for . . . the Young?’” in *The Child in Christian Thought*, ed. Marcia J. Bunge (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, Co., 2001), 134.

challenge the perception of childhood as an idyll or the perception that children are an idealization of what it is to be human. Both of these often function as powerful obstacles to a discussion of adult sin against children. A failure to care for children is not something we should wonder about. It is unfortunately a common issue among Christians as well as non-Christians.

Luther was a man of his time. Strohl emphasizes that we should be aware of the distance between his time and ours, with all of our knowledge about child development, when we evaluate Luther's contribution to the wellbeing of children. We should also remember that Luther was a theologian, not a social scientist. Strohl writes, "From his perspective, the most important contribution he made to the welfare of the children was his lifelong struggle for right understanding of the gospel and the freedom it created."<sup>2</sup>

Because of God's grace, which lay with Christ alone, there is a freedom to work for all goodness in this world and to let all of our energy be focused on our neighbor. Strohl states that for Luther, there was no closer neighbor than one's own children and no claim upon society more pressing than that of the young. The centrality of the call to care for the children can be said to have a clear emphasis both in the life and the teaching of Luther. Strohl writes, "Attending to children's physical welfare, their vocational prospects, their need to learn of God's grace not only through preaching and catechesis but also through the experience of human care and protection—this is an essential part of all Christian discipleship."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 158.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 159.

But for many of his contemporaries, children were generally treated as objects of care and education. Luther also shared the common perception of his time that the upbringing of children required that the parents tame and break the will of the child. The wayward tendencies of children demanded this. A reflection on the value of childhood itself and of taking a child's perspective on life and faith were not in question in Luther's thought.

*Graced Vulnerability: A Theology of Childhood*, David H. Jensen

What does it mean to be a child? Does childhood help us understand what it really means to be human, what it is to be created in the image of God, or what it is to be the Church? In his book, *Graced Vulnerability: A Theology of Childhood*, American theologian David H. Jensen raises such questions without giving any easy answers. It is his intention to let children and their vulnerability challenge the work of Christian theology.<sup>4</sup>

Jensen challenges the suggestion that the concept of *imago Dei* is meant to distinguish human beings from the rest of the God's creation.<sup>5</sup> He states that the problem with identifying certain qualities that supposedly reveal that humankind is made in God's image is that some people may not fulfill the criteria. Whether it is some moral consciousness or capacity for rational thought, the result of such logic is that certain people who lack these qualities become ignored or considered as "less human."

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<sup>4</sup> David Hadley Jensen, *Graced Vulnerability: A Theology of Childhood* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2005), xi.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

For Jensen, *imago Dei* is a relational grace that makes diversely shaped human lives possible in God's world. Vulnerability in difference, which could characterize children's lives, becomes a dimension of *imago Dei* and a mark that tells us about what discipleship and the Church is all about.<sup>6</sup> The narratives in the Old and the New Testament illustrate a vulnerable God who favors the vulnerable. Jensen stresses that vulnerability is not to be seen as a quality but as a gift of relatedness from God.

Jensen presents three traits that characterize what it means to be a child. He begins by arguing for a loose understanding of childhood that does not require marked lines between children and adults.<sup>7</sup> The three traits should not be understood as the essence of childhood but as marks of how children's lives are shaped differently than those of adults.

The first trait is that all children are chosen by God and loved simply because they are. The primary value is found in the gracious initiative of the Creator, not in the quality of the child. Jensen discusses the eternal choice that precedes both parent and child.<sup>8</sup> Children who are chosen by God are given to us, and this demands our response of care.

The second trait is that to be a child is to be open and vulnerable to the grace that makes life possible. Jensen points out that children are vulnerable to others, and thus they point to the God of Christian faith and the creatures God creates in love. The infant stretches out when it cries to be comforted, embraced, protected, and given food. Babies who are not touched will often become sick or die. All of these realities are expressions

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 46.

of the gift of relatedness and the dependence of life in God's world. Jensen cautions against romanticizing or idealizing childhood. He writes, "To be vulnerable is to expose oneself to possible harm and injury—to live on the edge, open to the world's profound beauty and its threatening violence."<sup>9</sup> As adults we often can choose whether we want to be vulnerable or not, but children are not in positions to choose where or with whom they live. In our reflection on the narratives of Jesus embracing the children and making them examples of faith, we often forget the very ethical implication of actually receiving children.

The third trait Jensen mentions regarding what it means to be a child is to be a pilgrim, oriented God-ward and toward the present.<sup>10</sup> Jensen refers to the decades-long research of Robert Coles on the spirituality of children. Coles mentions pilgrimage as one of the ways children's spirituality can be described.<sup>11</sup> For Jensen, children's attention to the present and their ability to wonder is an expression of their immediate delight in God's world. We often think about pilgrimage as reaching a goal and denying the immediacy of what is happening on the journey. The pilgrimage of children is an alternative where to be a pilgrim is to live in the present.

All these three traits Jensen mentions are of particular interest for this project. The child as chosen by God and given both as a gift and with a need for care is a perception of humanity that challenges us to protect and welcome every child. The second trait, the child's openness to the vulnerability that makes life possible, stands in

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 52.

deep contrast to every use of violence to control or to frightens somebody to withdraw or give themselves up. The challenge is to both embrace children as vulnerable human beings and to open our lives to the way of giving and receiving. The third trait, the child as a pilgrim, may help us view children in such a way that would prevent violation of them.

There are strengths in Jensen's theological understanding of the concept of *imago Dei* that are valuable for this project. But he is rather exclusive when he stresses that children are closer to the kingdom of heaven not because of childlike qualities that adults have lost but because they are chosen, loved, and embraced by God.<sup>12</sup> Although God's election and love are the primary reason for children's position in the kingdom, there is evidence in Jesus' practice and teaching that also gives a foundation for seeing children as models for kingdom life not only by their vulnerable state in life but also by their spiritual qualities. These spiritual qualities include trust, openness, freedom from hypocrisy, capacity for showing tenderness, altruism, and the ability to listen to their bodies. For example, children will rest when they are tired. The strength of Jensen's writing is that he does not idealize children in a way that romanticizes childhood, which could veil abuse and violation of children. His focus on difference also makes it difficult to view children as a category and not as individuals with different characters.

Jensen's theology of childhood stands in deep contrast to any disdain of childhood that may provide ground for neglect of children's bodies, thoughts, or spirituality. Theology should pay attention to children in reality rather than children in an abstract

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 48.

sense. It is about truly listening to their voices and their cries, and responding just as God listened and responded to the cries of Ishmael in Genesis 21:17. Jensen writes, “Attending and caring for the children in our midst is an indispensable component of Christian discipleship, a component that demands fresh perspectives in the face of the multiple forms of violence that scar children today.”<sup>13</sup> It is interesting that Jensen argues for a renewal of traditional practices of the church, baptism, peacemaking, sanctuary, and prayer, as a response to the call to care and protect children.

### **The Nature of the Church, God’s Mission, Children, and the Redemptive Reign of God**

The nature of the Church and God’s mission are seldom a topic for discussion where local plans for Christian education are being developed. This is a weakness, as perceptions of the Church and God’s mission will in many ways determine the ministry initiative. This project is concerned with developing a ministry that is grounded upon a careful consideration of the relationship between God’s mission and the Church.

#### *The Essence of the Church, Craig Van Gelder*

The reason why the Church should increase its awareness of and develop an advocacy for children of domestic violence is that the Church is called to respond to the redemptive reign of God in this world. The welfare of children is extremely relevant to kingdom life, and it should be a central missional practice of the Church. Craig Van Gelder has been one of the major voices in the missional church conversation that has taken place during the last fifteen years. One of the main statements in this conversation

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., xii.

is that we have to start with an understanding of God's redemptive reign and God's mission in this world to understand what the Church is. It is crucial to understand the relationship between the life and the ministry of the Church and God's mission in the world. In his book, *The Essence of the Church*, Van Gelder argues for an understanding of church as being missionary by nature, which provides for a more holistic way of thinking about mission than the traditional view of mission as an activity.<sup>14</sup> This holistic thinking implies that the Church is created by the Spirit to live as a demonstration that the full power of God's redemptive work is already active in this world.

Van Gelder is concerned about the fact that there is often debate in Christian circles regarding evangelism and social action. He writes, "The debate that ensues often produces much heat but little light. The church in North America needs to reframe this discussion starting from a more holistic understanding of the work of God in the world."<sup>15</sup> This could be said about the churches in Norway as well. It is hard to promote a holistic *diakonia* that embraces evangelism and social action. Van Gelder calls for a more holistic understanding of the work of God in the world based on an understanding of the kingdom of God as the redemptive reign of God. The Church is to be shaped by the redemptive reign of God. Therefore, in order to understanding the mission of God in the world and the church, it is crucial to come to clarity on the meaning of the "kingdom of God."<sup>16</sup> Van Gelder emphasizes that the kingdom should be understood as a dynamic

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<sup>14</sup> Craig Van Gelder, *The Essence of the Church: A Community Created by the Spirit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000), 504, Kindle.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 1402, Kindle.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 1176-1182, Kindle.



presence of God's redemptive power confronting the forces of evil and restoring life to its fullness.<sup>17</sup> He writes, "This fullness of life looks back to the intent of creation design and forward to the promises associated with the new heavens and new earth."<sup>18</sup>

It is clear that the Church is not an end in itself, but has been called to participate in God's mission and enter into the redemptive reign of God. In light of this, advocacy for children of domestic violence should not be thought of as just one ministry of the Church that one might choose among many other tasks. Advocacy for children of domestic violence is part of God's way of confronting the forces of evil and restoring life to its fullness.

There has often been a split in the Church between those who emphasize evangelism and those who emphasize social work. Sometimes this split can run along the lines of political conservatives and liberals. A missional understanding of the Church has the potential to overcome this split by providing for a more holistic view of God's mission and the ministry of the Church. For the purposes of this project, it is of crucial importance to establish a holistic understanding of mission and *diakonia*.

Van Gelder points to an interesting fact when he refers to the different pattern of words used to discuss the relationship between the reign of God and the Church.<sup>19</sup> Often we hear believers say that it is the Church's task to build, extend, promote, or establish the kingdom of God. But this is quite contradictory to Jesus' sayings about the kingdom. According to Jesus, the Church ought to receive, enter, seek, or inherit the kingdom. This

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 1197, Kindle.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 1373, Kindle.

is quite crucial for a Church that wants to increase awareness of and advocacy for children of domestic violence. If, by advocating for these children, we enter a field in which the redemptive work of God is already taking place, then believers ought to respond to the redemptive reign of God in this area where life in its fullness is so threatened.

The Church is a creation of the Spirit and a visible entity, the body of Christ. The primary focus in defining the relationship between the Spirit and the Church is not of empowering individuals, although this could be held to be an important biblical perspective. It is rather the empowering and formation of a new community that stands in the foreground.<sup>20</sup> It is essential for the Church to have a renewed understanding of itself as a social community that will be led by the Spirit to participate in God's work in this world. The concept of being led by the Spirit is an issue Van Gelder further develops in his book, *The Ministry of the Missional Church*.<sup>21</sup>

The redemptive reign of God must serve as the foundation for defining the nature, ministry, and organization of the Church.<sup>22</sup> Concerning this project's focus and purpose, this book has its limits. Van Gelder does not emphasize a reflection on the status and role of children in the redemptive reign of God. The relationship between Jesus, children, the kingdom of God, and the Church, as well as the status and role of children in the redemptive reign of God is a central topic this project explores. Though Van Gelder's book lacks this aspect, the next essay will provide some material for this purpose.

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Craig Van Gelder, *The Ministry of the Missional Church: A Community Led by the Spirit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007).

<sup>22</sup> Van Gelder, *The Essence of the Church*, 1182, Kindle.

### **“Whoever Welcomes Such a Child”: Advocacy for the Children of Domestic Violence**

This section focused on awareness of and care and advocacy for children as spiritual and Christian practices. An article and a book are presented here: “He Placed a Little Child in the Midst: Jesus, the Kingdom, and Children,” by Keith J. White, and *Let the Children Come*, by Bonnie Miller-McLemore. White’s article demonstrates how Jesus’ ministry and teaching connect God’s kingdom and children. Miller-McLemore’s book establishes a theology for parenting as a common responsibility for Christians.

“‘He Placed a Little Child in the Midst’: Jesus, the Kingdom, and Children,”  
Keith J. White

Probably the most significant child-related action of Jesus is described in the pericope of Matthew 18:1-14. In an essay by Dr. Keith J. White, one of the founders of the Child Theology Movement, the author explores some common questions the text raises, and reexamines the Gospel of Matthew as a whole from the perspective of having in mind the child placed by Jesus in the midst of the disciples.<sup>23</sup> By White’s reading of the Gospel of Matthew, he is eager to show that children in Matthew do not only serve as background material or metaphors in the teaching of Jesus, but that they are integral to the narrative and clues to its meaning.<sup>24</sup> He writes, “The conclusion is that children, whatever their age, are not only active participants in the unfolding story but are also essential for a true reading of the Gospel, understanding the identity and person of Jesus

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<sup>23</sup> Keith J. White, “‘He Placed a Little Child in the Midst’: Jesus, the Kingdom, and Children,” in *The Child in the Bible*, ed. by Marcia J. Bunge (Grand Rapids/Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008), 4259, Kindle.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 4283-4289, Kindle.

Christ, modeling the way of the cross, and representing the radical nature of ecclesial community.”<sup>25</sup>

White’s essay focuses on the special relationship between children, Jesus, and the kingdom of heaven.<sup>26</sup> White is pointing at the danger of making the real child invisible in our reading of the text. White does not reject the idea of the child as a metaphor for “little ones” or the connection between the child and the disciples. But he strongly affirms that Jesus was genuinely interested in the well-being of the particular child when he made the child a sign of the kingdom of God and of receiving himself.<sup>27</sup>

In his essay, White sums up his reading of Matthew under five headings. First, children are part of the kingdom. Children in the story are depicted as receiving the kingdom in contrast to the disciples, the leaders of the Jewish people. Second, Jesus and children are humble. In his ministry, Jesus embraced a lowly status and acts with humility, and receiving children becomes the true mark of greatness. Children, who are considered to be of lowest status from an earthly perspective, are the greatest in God’s eyes. Third, Jesus identifies with children, particularly in the way they are often marginalized and rejected. It is notable that Jesus is placing a child in their midst in the context of his teaching about his suffering, death, and resurrection. Receiving the concrete and rejected child without any thought of reward can be likened to the challenge to receive the real Jesus, along with the suffering that comes with him. Fourth, Jesus welcomes children. White states, “This welcome and acceptance is the beginning of a

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 4289-4294, Kindle.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 4423, Kindle.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 4439, Kindle.

community (body) of believers.”<sup>28</sup> Fifth, the Gospel of Matthew deeply connects children to Jesus. White writes, “Children, Jesus, and the kingdom of heaven in Matthew’s Gospel inform one another and are congruent to such an extent that they might be said to be inseparable.”<sup>29</sup>

White’s narrative approach to the Gospel of Matthew, with his the perspective of Jesus placing a child in their midst, is interesting related to the purpose of this project. The identification between Jesus as rejected and the receiving of rejected children strongly supports advocacy of children of domestic violence. It also builds a bridge between the narratives about the kingdom of God and the struggles of children. White’s reading of the Matthew’s Gospel will be discusses in the next chapter, which among other themes focuses on the relationship between God’s mission and children.

White’s essay provides a solid foundation for a heightened focus on advocacy for children who suffer from neglect or violence. His link between receiving the concrete child in Jesus’ name and receiving Jesus himself gives solid ground for the Church to ask how we can contribute to the safety and healing of children of domestic violence. Although White is clear about the call of welcoming children, he does not provide much reflection on what this receiving will actually look like in the everyday life of the Church. The next book will serve to give more concrete thoughts on what it is to receive children in the name of Jesus.

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 4497, Kindle.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 4502, Kindle.

*Let the Children Come*, Bonnie Miller-McLemore

In her book, *Let the Children Come*, Bonnie Miller-McLemore writes, “Children must be fully respected as persons, valued as gifts, and viewed as agents.”<sup>30</sup> This statement sums up what Miller-McLemore thinks should be the marks of a Christian practice of care for children. The purpose of her book is to contribute to a fresh vision of childhood. She provides for a dialogue between Christianity, feminism, and psychology in search of a right way to view children in a time of great transition. Miller-McLemore boldly describes and challenges common views of childhood and searches for alternative ways formed by the narratives of covenant people of God and Jesus’ sayings and practices. She is eager to develop more child-friendly Christian perceptions of childhood to better be able to care for and practice justice on behalf of children in a time of rapid change. Miller-McLemore acknowledges that psychology has revealed how some traditional religious ideas have served to legitimate and sanction abusive behavior, but she also notes that there are roots in the Christian tradition that recommend a much more positive view of children, and these need to be rediscovered and renewed in our time. In many ways, Miller-McLemore shows how popular psychology has robbed children of agency and often offers only very narrow explanations regarding failure in raising children.

The idea of children as gifts is a popular cliché, but this idea is not often a reality when one looks at the status of children in Jewish and Christian tradition.<sup>31</sup> Miller-McLemore asserts that if people came to know more about what it really means in

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<sup>30</sup> Miller-McLemore, *Let the Children Come*, xxiii.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 83.

Christian terms to say that the child is a gift, they might hesitate to use that phrase so readily.<sup>32</sup> She states that both some early Christian traditions and modernity have distorted the radical view and status of children among the covenant people of God in the Old Testament and in Jesus' practice. In actuality, the household codes in Ephesians 5:22-6:9 and Colossians 3:18-4:1 reflects a modified use of the conventional patriarchal family structure, which should increase respect for children. But in practice, believers have focused on the sanctioning of male authority over his household when they read these passages. The covenant tradition and the narratives of Jesus receiving children could serve as starting point for a Christian re-imagination about childhood. Both in the covenant and in the narratives of Jesus, children are given full status as members of the kingdom of God.

Miller-McLemore especially reflects on children's agency as moral and spiritual beings. In turn, children's moral agency should lead to respect for their bodies. A common view is that parents have the right to make decisions related to their children's bodies.<sup>33</sup> Miller-McLemore calls for a reform in this area. Adults have to take time to explain to children the difference between appropriate and inappropriate touching on their bodies. Children should also be regarded as capable of doing both good and bad.

Children have a spiritual agency. The view of children as spiritual stands in contrast to a lot of traditional thought that has treated children as passive receivers of Christian teaching. Miller-McLemore mentions children's capacity for contemplation in

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 165.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 143.

the midst of chaos and for asking questions of essential importance. These actions lead to God and what is life giving.

The practice of raising children belongs to all Christians, and not solely to parents or to mothers.<sup>34</sup> This is one of the strong statements in the last chapter of Miller-McLemore's book. She is eager to increase Christians' engagement in care for children. She draws on two strands in her argument for an increased focus on care. The first strand draws upon insights from womanist theologians, who affirm and practice the tradition of "othermothering," where grandmothers, sisters, aunts, and neighbors share the right and the task of raising and caring for children.<sup>35</sup> This challenges the idea of children as the private property of their parents. The second strand draws upon the concept of adoption, a theological doctrine that has been overshadowed by the doctrine of justification by Lutherans and sanctification by Methodists.<sup>36</sup> In the Westminster Confession, adoption is placed right between the section on justification and sanctification. The status of God's children is that they are adopted into a divine family, not by inheritance but out of God's initiative. This theme invites radical practice, explains McLemore: "Christians are called to transcend common biological loyalties and extend the same generosity of spirit toward children not their own."<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 165.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. Womanist theology is contextual theology done from an African American perspective. Miller-McLemore says that womanist theologian often challenges liberationist and feminist theologians to stretch categories of analysis to include racism and sexism and have introduced the tradition of "othermothering."

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 166.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 167.



For the purposes of this project, Miller-McLemore's ideas are significant. It will demand courage to let go of an individualistic view of the caretaking of children as the parents' sole responsibility. Caring for children should be a shared responsibility, both for the wellbeing of a child physically and spiritually. Stairs writes, "If 'it takes a village to raise a child' then the corollary is also true: 'it takes a church to care for a child's soul.' Everyone has a part to play in creating a community where children feel that they do belong to God, are valued, are taken seriously, and are loved beyond measure."<sup>38</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Parenting as a spiritual practice and vocation is well emphasized and reasoned for in a Lutheran tradition. The concept of paradox plays a central part in Lutheran faith. The paradox of every Christian as sinner and saint, and the local church as a social and spiritual entity, could provide space for speaking honestly about child abuse and other expressions of sin that Christian adults are responsible for. Children are not only objects of care but can teach us about what it really means to be human as they represent a graced vulnerability.

Awareness of and advocacy and care for children in a violent world is not just about a need that many churches have decided to respond to. The connection between God's redemptive reign and children invites an understanding of receiving children as something more than an act of grace. It is about practicing kingdom life. These discussions are further explored in the next chapter.

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<sup>38</sup> Stairs, *Listening for the Soul*, 162.

## CHAPTER 3

### AN AWARENESS AND ADVOCACY THEOLOGY FOR THE WOUNDED CHILD

Developing a church's awareness of and advocacy for children of domestic violence will certainly face obstacles. It could be difficult to open up a space for talking about a theme that is often conveyed with shame and guilt. The tendency to protect parents at the cost of the children's wellbeing and safety is common. As adults, it can be very easy to identify with the parents rather than the child. On the other hand, usually the best way to help children is to care for their parents as well. One wonders whether parents are given sufficient support and guidance by the church and the community so that they might be able to practice faith, love, and justice with their children. It is therefore important that our initiatives are rooted in values of Christian life and faith based on theological deliberation so that they might offer love and justice for both children and parents.

Every new ministry initiative needs theological deliberation. To develop a new diaconal practice, those initiating this process need to listen to the voices and needs of children. They must let these voices and needs challenge their theology about church and mission so that any new initiative is rooted in their needs, in the Scripture, and in the faith

of the Church. It is about seeing, judging, and acting out a new practice. In other words, in the process of developing the Church's awareness of and advocacy for children of domestic violence, this new diaconal practice should benefit from both empirical and theological knowledge. Theological consideration in this project will be based on a theology of parenting, insights from child theology, the relationship between God's mission and the Church, and the narrative of God's self-revelation as a God of love, justice, and compassion. The latter will be the starting point in this chapter.

### **The Narrative of God's Awareness and Advocacy for the Children**

God's advocacy for the vulnerable is a central theme in the biblical narrative of God's salvation of the world. His concern for the weak, the least, the poor, the humble, the widows, the fatherless, and orphan children is central to the story in both the Old Testament and the New Testament (Exodus 22:22-24; James 1:27). In particular, Jesus reveals God's compassion and advocacy for those who are exposed to violence, who suffer from the wrongdoings of others, or who are left out or stigmatized. Jesus is the incarnation of God of compassion and justice.

The perspective of children is often not at the forefront in the Bible, as the biblical text seldom reflects the voices of children. It is therefore important to discover the meta-narratives of the biblical text.<sup>1</sup> These meta-narratives often unearth hidden paradigms in the text, which may offer insight regarding the world children are experiencing and God's heart for the vulnerable child.

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Stockley, "Conclusion," in *Understanding God's Heart for Children*, eds. Douglas McConnell, Jennifer Orona, and Paul Stockley (Colorado Springs: Authentic Publishing, 2007), 302.

## God's Preference for the Least and Ministry to the Wounded

God's compassion and advocacy for the victims of violence finds expression in the primal history of Israel. There are two stories in Genesis that could be fruitful in developing a practical theology of awareness of and advocacy for children of domestic violence. Both stories give voice to the victims of violence in the family caused by conflict, shame, jealousy, and aggression. The first is the story of Cain and Abel in Genesis 4, and the second is the story of Ishmael, Hagar, Abraham, and Sara in Genesis 21.

The story about Cain and Abel in Genesis 4 gives the first real and raw expression of the consequences of sin as part of the human existence. It gives an account of the roots of violence. Distrust and a lack of capability or willingness to see the face of the other, in this case the brother, leads to violence. While Genesis 3 describes the fall as alienation from God, Genesis 4 gives an account of the consequences of sin in the relationship between human beings.

The story takes the perspective of the victim, but it also offers insight into the perspective of the perpetrator, as Miroslav Volf asserts in his book, *Exclusion and Embrace*. Volf writes, "[The story's] greatness lies precisely in that it combines a clear judgment against the perpetrator with the commitment to protect him from the rage of the 'innocent' victim."<sup>2</sup> Cain is both the murderous "them" and the murderous "us." The story witnesses God's strong commitment to break the cycle of violence. It also speaks of a God who sees hidden violence.

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<sup>2</sup> Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace—A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 93.

The story is an early expression of the dynamics of conflict and domestic violence. Before violence or abuse takes place, there is often a lack of positive emotional engagement with the child on the part of the caregiver. The caregiver is not truly seeing and listening to the child, nor is he or she entering the world of the child's thoughts and feelings. In the story of Cain and Abel, Cain is not able to see his brother.

The story has many layers of meaning that allow for study from many perspectives. The main focus of the story is about how Cain and God are dealing with the blood of the brother which cries from the earth. It is about being a brother and how to resist evil. But it is also a starting point for the story about God's advocacy for the least, the humble, and those who are especially endangered by another's misuse of power.

Reading the story from the perspective of victims of violence could strengthen the focus on the prior condition for the story. The Hebraic names play a part in the story. Eve names her first son Cain, which means "to produce or bring forth," while her next son is called Abel, which could either mean "breath" or "worthlessness or nothingness."<sup>3</sup> Cain was the one who inherited the land and the fertile soil, while Abel was the keeper of sheep.<sup>4</sup> It is the genesis of violence and division between the desired, privileged, and blessed son and the less desired son.

The story says nothing about why God accepted Abel's offering while he rejected Cain's. But it is possible to read this story in light of a common theme in the great narrative of the Old Testament, which is that God often favors the vulnerable in a broken

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

and violent world to be his servants for bringing salvation to all the world. Abel represents Israel while Cain represents the way of power and control.

The story of Cain and Abel illustrates a God who is moved by the silent cry of the victim of violence and holds the violent accountable for his work. In the story of Cain and Abel, the violence was hidden from the community, and this is often the case when children experience violence in their homes. But although no one else sees, God always sees. To use violence against another human being is to violate the image of God. It is a crime against the victim, but it is also a crime against God. God forbids the cycle of violence and revenge by protecting Cain (Genesis 4:15). The primary goal of God's initiative is to put the violence to an end. God's initiative is an initiative of love and justice.

In his essay, “‘God Was with the Boy’—Children in the Book of Genesis,” Professor Terence E. Fretheim reexamines Genesis through the lens of the child, as he highlights the critical role that children play in the book.<sup>5</sup> He emphasizes that the Hebrew children grew up in turmoil and instability and suffered the effects of war. All the promises God gives focus on the birth of children. There are also stories of remarkably poor parenting.<sup>6</sup>

Fretheim devotes special attention to two endangered children in his essay, Ishmael and Isaac. The stories of Ishmael and of Isaac show the dysfunctionality of Abraham's family, and how the children were endangered in different ways. God's

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<sup>5</sup> Terence Fretheim, “‘God Was with the Boy’—Children in the Book of Genesis,” in *The Child and the Bible*, ed. by Marcia J. Bunge (Grand Rapids, MI/Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), 199, Kindle.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

choosing of one child before the other seems to create even more conflict in the families of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.<sup>7</sup>

Fretheim explains the importance of Ishmael: “The text about Ishmael in Genesis is a lens through which to read the many references to orphans and other underprivileged children in the Old Testament, for he is the first such biblical individual.”<sup>8</sup> The strongest point in the story is when God hears the cry, not of the mother but of the child, and answers by empowering Hagar to see the well nearby. God’s plan also includes those who are favored among humans.

This story may reflect Israel’s special concern for orphans and widows, which becomes a theme in the Old Testament books.<sup>9</sup> Fretheim asserts that “mistreatment of children becomes a sign of the unfaithfulness of adults to their God.”<sup>10</sup> God blesses and gives his promises not only to the chosen child, but also to the one who is outside.

#### Advocacy Expressed as a Moral Imperative—The Prophetic Tradition

“I am the Lord, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight declares the Lord” (Jeremiah 9:24). All of the biblical writers give testimony to God’s character of love and justice. That God is just and expects justice among his people is based on God’s acts of rescue in the history of his people.

God’s advocacy for those who are endangered or in a position of being exploited is expressed through a call to practice love and justice. Throughout the Bible, the reader

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 332, Kindle.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 339, Kindle.

finds sayings that could be described as moral imperatives. In the Book of Psalms, God is pictured as a King who expects justice: “Defend the weak and the fatherless; uphold the cause of the poor and the oppressed. Rescue the weak and the needy; and deliver them from the hand of the wicked” (Psalms 82:3-4).<sup>11</sup> The letter of James repeats the theme of widows and parentless children and affirms that caring for and doing justice toward them is part of true worship of God (James 1:27).

Pastoral theologian Donald Capps, in his book on religious abuse of children, asserts that there is a deep contrast between Jesus’ teaching and practice regarding children and the text in Hebrews 12:5-11.<sup>12</sup> Like the disciples of Jesus, the authors of the biblical texts did not necessarily grasp the full meaning of Jesus’ advocacy for children. Some sayings and pericopes of the Bible, like Hebrew 12:5-11, have been used to defend physical punishment as part of child rearing. But theologically this is an illegitimate way of reading and interpreting the Scripture.

In an essay that serves as the conclusion at the end of the book, *Understanding God’s Heart for Children*, Paul Stokley names certain areas or issues that need further attention. He points to the texts of the Bible that picture violence and slaughter of children that seems to be sanctioned by God.<sup>13</sup> This is important because while the Bible to some extent describes acts of violence against children, it seldom gives voice to the cries of the children. The near sacrifice of Isaac as instructed by God is probably the most

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<sup>11</sup> All biblical references will be taken from the New International Version unless otherwise noted.

<sup>12</sup> Donald Capps, *The Child’s Song: The Religious Abuse of Children* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 66.

<sup>13</sup> Stokley, “Conclusion,” 302.



difficult text regarding children in Genesis. From a perspective of child abuse, the story is terrifying. The reader is left to wonder what kind of God would give a father such a test to prove his faith and obedience when clearly it would cause lifelong trauma to the child. The life and ministry of Jesus and his non-violence could be a legitimate theological lens through which to critique the story and give power to the voice of Isaac.

### Jesus—The Good Shepherd and the Child

The strongest affirmation of children's dignity in the Bible is found in the stories of Jesus meeting with children and his statement about children and the kingdom of God. Matthew, Mark, and Luke refer to some occasions where Jesus embraces and blesses children and lets them become part of his teaching. In the narrative of Matthew, there is an occasion where Jesus responds to a question from his disciples by making a child a sign of his kingdom (Matthew 18:1-14). This story may be the same occasion that is being referred to both in Mark 9:33-37 and Luke 9:46-48, but Matthew provides the most detailed account. This particular story shows the indissoluble connection between children as a sign and model of the kingdom, the manner in which one might enter the kingdom, and God's committed advocacy for children.

The story as told by Matthew begins with the disciples' quarrel about who is the greatest in the kingdom of God. Then Jesus calls a child and presents him or her as a model of what it takes to enter the kingdom of heaven. The children are made a living parable of the kingdom. Jesus also makes a dissoluble connection between hospitality towards a child and hospitality towards himself.

When Jesus states, “Whoever welcomes such a child in my name welcomes me” (Matthew 18:5), Jesus makes a profound identification. This statement has puzzled readers of the Bible through centuries. In many readings of the passage, children are understood figuratively as representing disciples or those who are new to the faith. This is done in a way that leaves out the connection between Jesus and literal children. Such reading reduces the formative power the text could have on developing advocacy for children of domestic violence.

White stresses the fact that Jesus would not take a child as a sign without being genuinely interested in the well-being of that particular child.<sup>14</sup> In his interpretation the little child becomes “a recipient of the kingdom of heaven, a model of what it means to enter the kingdom of heaven, a sign of the humility required in the kingdom of heaven, and also one who, when welcomed, becomes the means of welcoming Jesus.”<sup>15</sup> In this way, the metaphorical use of children does not exclude the moral imperative in Jesus’ saying.

If Jesus deliberately wishes the disciples to pay attention to children and welcome children, Jesus’ warning also needs to be interpreted with literal children in our minds. In Jesus’ warning about making any little one stumble (Matthew 18:6-9), one sees the God whose anger is great when it comes to adult misuse of power. Rejecting children is the same as rejecting Jesus. The hyperbole of cutting off one’s arm strengthens the seriousness of making any little one stumble. It reflects the image of God in Exodus

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<sup>14</sup> White, ““He Placed a Little Child in the Midst,”” 4439, Kindle.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

22:22-24, where God hears the cry of the abused widow or fatherless child and is aroused by anger for their sake.

Theologians have wondered how long the child in Matthew's narrative is present during Jesus' teaching. The theme of welcoming and caring for the little ones closes with the parable about the lost sheep in Matthew 18. If the child Jesus has called is still present when Jesus gives the parable of the lost sheep, this would be a strong statement about the value of each child in God's eyes. The text in Matthew 18:1-14, combined with the fact that Jesus calls himself the Good Shepherd in John 10:10-18, provides a powerful image of God as one who has special concern for children, particularly those who have been lost by adults' misuse of power.

Another story in the Gospel of Matthew that witnesses to Jesus' advocacy for children takes place in the temple during the Passover week (Matthew 21:14-17). A group of children is shouting in the temple, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" The children's tribute, along with Jesus' cleansing of the temple and healing of the sick, provoked the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They confronted Jesus asking if he heard what the children were saying. Jesus replied by quoting Psalm 8: "From the lips of children and infants, you, Lord, have called forth your praise." This strongly legitimated the children's worship in the temple.

In light of Jesus' ministry to the children, it could be said that children have a special place in God's plan to bring his salvation to all the world. Jesus' ministry is a revelation of God and his kingdom. But it is also a revelation about children, childhood, and God's vision and dream for humanity. This leads to the relationship between God's mission, the Church, and children.

## **God's Mission, the Church, and the Children**

It is unknown whether the voices of children are recognized in the Church. The welfare of children is probably not a central issue at the table when churches are discussing theology and doing strategic planning. This project reflects theologically about the relationship between God's mission, the Church, and the role of children. The connection between church ministry and God's advocacy for the least and the broken must be considered. Lack of theological consideration in regards to this issue could be an obstacle to developing new attitudes and practices concerning vulnerable children.

If there is a deep and indissoluble connection between God's mission and work in this world and vulnerable children, a central task for a Church in its discernment and strategic planning would be to listen to children's voices and also to ask what is happening to children in this community. A heightened awareness of God's mission could affect the way the issue of children's wellbeing is treated in the Church. In this way, this project will not only provoke an increased consciousness about the vulnerability of children in the family, but it will be based on an understanding of the work of the Triune God in this world, his mission, and his Church. This part of the chapter will focus on two aspects: first, the relationship between God's redemptive rule and the Church, and second, the understanding of the Church as a compassionate and diaconal Church.

### **God's Mission—The Redemptive Reign and the Church**

The ideas that the Church encompasses the reign of God and that the Church and the reign of God are nearly synonymous have often dominated thinking about church and mission. This conception has led to the belief that kingdom extension and church growth

are interchangeable ideas. The danger of such a view is that it very well leads to practice where the Church becomes an end in itself and that there is no salvation outside the Church. This kind of thinking has been seriously challenged in the recent years by a new conversation about the relationship between God's mission and the nature of the Church.<sup>16</sup> In *Missional Church*, Darrell L. Guder writes, "The church must not be equated with the reign of God."<sup>17</sup>

Guder also writes, "The reign of God should not be divorced from the church."<sup>18</sup> In an eagerness to distinguish between the reign of God and the Church, theologians in the ecumenical movement in the 1950s and 1960s maintained a view that implied a separation of the Church and the reign of God in the world.<sup>19</sup> The idea was that God's mission took place in the world and the Church should go out into the reign of God in the world and join God there. This view contradicted a biblical understanding of the Church as constituted by those who enter and receive the kingdom of God. The Church consists of a new people created by God to declare his praises (1 Peter 2:9). The Church represents the kingdom of God as community, servant, and as messenger.<sup>20</sup> It is created

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<sup>16</sup> In 1998, Guder's book, *Missional Church*, was published. This book was the result of two years of discussions by six missiologists about God's mission and the nature of the Church. The term *missional* was used to create a new imagination and conversation about God's mission and the Church.

<sup>17</sup> Darrell L. Guder, ed., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company 1998), 1797, Kindle.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 1814, Kindle.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 1875, Kindle.

by the Spirit to be a sign, witness, and foretaste of the redemptive rule of God (Acts 1:8). Everything the Church is and does is done before a watching world (Matthew 5:13-16).

The conversation about the missional church takes the larger mission of the Triune God as its starting point. The Latin term *missio Dei*, which became the main expression about mission in the ecumenical movement after the conference in Willingen in 1952, reflects a holistic understanding of mission based on a Trinitarian perspective. The *missio Dei* determines the gospel to be the good news of God's redemptive reign over the whole human life. In light of this, missional church is about God and his intention of bringing back all of creation into right relationship. It is a much larger vision than simply saving individuals for a heaven, as many Christians would define mission. The Church is a result of God's mission and it is called to participate in God's plan (2 Corinthians 5:19). In their book, *The Missional Church in Perspective*, Craig Van Gelder and Dwight J. Zscheile write, "In our view missional imagination is fundamentally about seeing the church and the world in light of the Triune God's presence and activity."<sup>21</sup> This statement draws attention to an understanding of the Church as missionary by nature. The church is missionary by nature, not as activity but as part of God's mission to the world.

In light of this project, there is an interesting and important characteristic of the missional church conversation. It moves the focus from management to discernment, and it focuses attention on the importance of doing theology locally. The conversation encourages a reorientation of one's thinking about the Church in regards to God's activity

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<sup>21</sup> Craig Van Gelder and Dwight J. Zscheile, *The Missional Church in Perspective: Mapping Trends and Shaping the Conversation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books 2011), 148, Kindle.

in the world.<sup>22</sup> The local church should develop a practice of common prayer or work of discernment based on biblical and theological imagination about the nature of the Church and the redemptive rule of God.

The work and task of a missional imagination can prepare for a renewed genuine listening to the hearts of children. Van Gelder and Zscheile write, “From the perspective of missional theology, imagination is not the property of autonomous individuals. Rather, it is one of the ways in which the Holy Spirit moves within and among us to lead us into God’s missional activity in the world.”<sup>23</sup> Asking the question about God’s mission and searching for what God is up to in this particular time and place is about doing theology together, listening to the Spirit of life. It is about openness to the Spirit and the world which God so loves.<sup>24</sup>

To be able to discern the work of God in a particular time and space, the local church needs to look at its context through theological lenses. In his book, *The Ministry of the Missional Church*, Van Gelder introduces several questions of discernment that are central to the missional church. These questions can be summarized by: What is God doing and what does God want to do?<sup>25</sup> These questions should be at the forefront when local churches plan their ministries.

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<sup>22</sup> Craig Van Gelder, *The Ministry of the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books 2007), 18.

<sup>23</sup> Van Gelder and Zscheile, *The Missional Church in Perspective*, 148.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 149.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 59.

This work of discernment should not be done without ideas or guiding signs. The imagination should be informed by the narratives of the Bible, especially Jesus' teaching about the signs of the kingdom. Jesus asks, "What is the kingdom of God like or what should we compare it with?" (Luke 13:18-20). These questions should be critical in the process of discernment when a local church is planning any kind of ministry. The local church is to reflect upon what it is to live under the rule of God. In fact, the Church exists to be a visible reminder of what it is to live under God's rule.<sup>26</sup>

Jesus' welcome and empowerment of children is central to his teaching about the kingdom. The missional imagination of the Church must consider the way he identified with the child and made the child a sign and the greatest in the kingdom. Children, along with the wounded and oppressed, should inform the missional imagination. Missional imagination should pave the way for kingdom life, which centers upon advocacy for the least and ministry to the lost.

According to the status children are given by Jesus and the position they have in the mission of God, there is theological basis for asking about God's heart in relation to children. To ask questions about children's life conditions, their safety, and the way the community contributes to their spiritual health and development should not be a secondary question for the local church. This leads to another dimension of the Church—the diaconal church.

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<sup>26</sup> Graham Tomlin, *The Provocative Church* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2004), 60.



## A Diaconal and Passionate Church

*Diakonia* is an essential part of discipleship. The Church is to be incarnated in human reality, sensitive to the suffering and injustice in this world. This is part of the mandate Jesus gave his disciples in John 20:21. The Church is a spiritual and social manifestation of God's mission, created by the Spirit to be a sign, witness, and foretaste of the kingdom of God. This kingdom of God has broken into our world but awaits its full realization in the future (Acts 1:8). The Church is created and sent into the world to respond to the needs and challenges of the community.

*Diakonia* is an essential dimension of the missional church. *Diakonia* is not an option, but it is an essential part of discipleship. The Church is diaconal both by nature and mandate. The first disciples and all believers who have followed in their footsteps, including the Church today, must stand in continuity with the mission of Jesus as incarnated in this world. But there is a discontinuity between Christology and ecclesiology. The mission and work of Christ was unique in several ways, and only his work provides for redemption.

In his book, *Liberating Diakonia*, Professor Kjell Nordstokke develops a strong theology of the diaconal Church. He contends that the work of Jesus constitutes *diakonia*.<sup>27</sup> He specifically bases this on Jesus' act of washing the feet of the disciples (John 13) and the Apostle Paul's expression of the *diakonia* as reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:18). Nordstokke asserts that if correctly understood, it follows that the *diakonia* is an integral part of the Church's identity and life. The *diakonia* is not an activity for a few particularly dedicated individuals, nor is it made necessary by some

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<sup>27</sup> Kjell Nordstokke, *Liberating Diakonia* (Trondheim: Tapir Akademisk Forlag, 2011), 22.

special social conditions, but it is related to what is being celebrated in the liturgy of the Church and its preaching.<sup>28</sup>

Often *diakonia* has been understood as a humble and silent service for those in need. Historically such a view is connected with the movement of pietism within the Lutheran tradition. This view has influenced the understanding of *diakonia* in a Norwegian church context until recently. Nordstokke challenges such a view and broadens the meaning of *diakonia* beyond humble service to also include public witness, liberation, and advocacy. He speaks of a prophetic dimension of *diakonia* and of an empowering *diakonia*.<sup>29</sup> *Diakonia* is to be understood as a ministry empowered by the Spirit.

Due to research on the semantic value of the word *diakonia*, which Nordstokke mentions, there is a need for an adjustment regarding the perception of *diakonia*.<sup>30</sup> One of the adjustments Nordstokke calls for is a new authority for the praxis of *diakoni*, including, “breaking out of traditional servility and silent service, giving diaconal work its prophetic task, denouncing injustice, [and] announcing the dignity of the lowly and God’s liberating love incarnated in human reality.”<sup>31</sup> This intersects well with the thesis of this project.

Children who are wounded due to their parents’ lack of care or abuse should certainly expect to experience God’s care through the Church. They should also

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 47.

experience the Church speaking out for them and fighting against the misuse of power and violence against children. The Church must speak truthfully about sin against children and their vulnerable state. Children are never to blame for domestic violence.

Awareness of and advocacy for children of domestic violence must empower children. Just as Jesus had authority or power in relation to the people he ministered to, *diakonia* for children must be experienced as empowering. People were often puzzled by the power or authority Jesus showed (Luke 9:8).

It is easier to do something on behalf of one's neighbor than to enter fully into his or her reality, explain Van Gelder and Zscheile.<sup>32</sup> To do something on behalf of others could be a way of distancing oneself from them, especially if there is a lack of willingness to listen to them or be with them. To be the Church is to participate in the Triune God's mission in this world. The creation, the incarnation, and the outpouring of the Spirit show that God is a God who steps fully into life with compassion and solidarity for the vulnerable. At the Cross, this vulnerability of God is at its clearest point.

Van Gelder and Zscheile write, "Mission is rooted in the Spirit's moving the church to compassionate love for its neighbors—a love that suffers with (*cum-passio*)."<sup>33</sup> The way of a diaconal church should be the way of the Cross, which is at the center of the God's story of reconciliation. Through the incarnation and the life and death of Jesus, God stepped into the life and struggle of human beings (Philippians 2:5-9). At the cross God did not only suffer in the place of sinners, but he also suffered with all those who are victims of violence and abuse of power. An understanding of the diaconal church should

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<sup>32</sup> Van Gelder and Zscheile, *The Missional Church in Perspective*, 116.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 115.

not only be derived from semantic research on the value of the word *diakonia*, but it should be informed by the great story of Jesus' incarnation and salvation as well.

The centrality of the cross in the Christian story challenges every church to ask questions about those who might be suffering among us. The theme of bearing one another's burdens is always central to what it means to be church (Galatians 6:2). It is a continuous bearing of each other in solidarity and acknowledgement of belonging to Christ and to each other. In this project, an important question is whether or not we as Christians dare to see, whether we dare to listen to the suffering child and try to change the situation for the child. Often when leaders in children's ministry are asked about their knowledge of the children they serve, some would say that there are certain children they are worried about.

*Diakonia* has been described as the healing service of the Church.<sup>34</sup> This healing service has a communal dimension. In his book, *How to Build a Diaconal Church*, Alf B. Oftestad writes, "The main task of diaconal work is to build a Christian fellowship of care enabling the care for those who are outside through those who are inside."<sup>35</sup> Domestic violence against children often causes invisible scars that not always are easy to heal. In light of this, the communal dimension of *diakonia* is of great importance. Martin Luther asserted that every local church should be a hospital for the incurably sick.<sup>36</sup> The idea that Christians should be Christ to each other is a common theme in

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<sup>34</sup> Nordstokke, *Liberating Diakonia*, 50.

<sup>35</sup> Alf B. Oftestad, *How to Build a Diaconal Church* (Oslo: Diakonova, 2009), 68.

<sup>36</sup> Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *An Introduction to Ecclesiology* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press Academic, 2002), 47.

Luther's theology. The *summa* of the Christian life is to bear each other's burdens. A diaconal church should also be about providing a safe space for those who are wounded and who will face difficult challenges in life due to the injuries they have suffered.

In a Lutheran theology the local church is the assembly of saints.<sup>37</sup> Nordstokke writes, "The saints are . . . the people justified by faith in Christ and empowered to participate in God's love through service."<sup>38</sup> In the Lutheran orthodoxy, following the teachings of Luther, *diakonia* became secondary to what constituted the Church, the Word, and the sacraments. *Diakonia* was a gift of thanks due to the grace received by faith in Christ. The distinction between *favor* ("goodwill or grace") and *donum* ("gift") in the Lutheran Church's *ordo salutis*, or "order of salvation," contributed to this view. Nordstokke asserts that recent research has shown that Luther himself did not make a clear separation between *favour* and *donum*.<sup>39</sup> Nordstokke emphasizes that justification by faith became dominant at the cost of an organic understanding of salvation. The consequence of this development was the dominant view of seeing the church as a place for hearing the Word and receiving the sacraments rather than a place "for living together the newness of life in Christ and for being participants in God's mission to the world."<sup>40</sup> In light of Luther's view, Word and sacraments are foundational to the church and expressions of God's grace, but the gift of new life in Christ is as well. The baptism and

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<sup>37</sup> "Confessio Augustana Article 7," in Leif Grane, *The Augsburg Confession—A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1987), 896, Kindle.

<sup>38</sup> Nordstokke, *Liberating Diakonia*, 26.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

the Holy Communion empower, transform, and create a community of disciples for service in the world.

A theology and practice of the Holy Communion could empower a ministry of awareness of and advocacy for children of domestic violence. Through Communion, the Church becomes one in receiving the body of Christ that was broken in his confrontation with the violent and evil powers of this world. Holy Communion as the giving and receiving of the broken body of Christ also provides a way for understanding the Church as a broken body, not in terms of being divided because of theological differences, but in terms of remembering that brothers and sisters in this fellowship consist of redeemed victims and agents of sin. The Church as a broken body could serve as a powerful image for increasing awareness of victims of violence and practicing solidarity with those who are wounded by violence.

A *diaconal* church is a real church, where people dare to be honest about life, not just as they wished it would be, but as it is in the everyday struggle for care and justice.. Van Gelder writes, “As a new humanity, the church is responsible to bring God’s redeeming power to every dimension of life.”<sup>41</sup> This includes the lives of children and their families.

The church is called to participate in God’s compassion for the weak and the vulnerable. This participation is reflected in the great judgment scene in Matthew 25. The blessed and righteous who will inherit the kingdom ask the questions, “When did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink?” (Matthew 25:37). These questions reflect an attitude of concern and compassion for those in need. They are

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<sup>41</sup> Van Gelder, *The Essence of the Church*, 1513, Kindle.

surprised by the King's answer: "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me" (Matthew 25:40). This response reflects Jesus' identification with the vulnerable.

### **The Vulnerable Child of God**

Children are vulnerable in this world. The word *vulnerable* comes from the Latin root *vulnerare*, which means "to wound."<sup>42</sup> Being vulnerable is to be exposed to being wounded or to injury. For children it means, as Jensen expresses, "to live on the edge, open to the world's profound beauty and its threatening violence."<sup>43</sup> Every human enters this world as vulnerable, dependent upon others.

This vulnerability is created by God, as every human is created to live in relationship—with God, with oneself, with others, and with the environment (Romans 14:7). Vulnerability could be understood as a gift of relatedness from God.<sup>44</sup> The biblical story of creation, fall, reconciliation, and restoration reveals a God of vulnerability. The strongest expression of this is seen in the incarnation and at the cross. In Jesus' identification with children and his moral challenge to the disciples to receive and care for them (Matthew 18:1-14), the Church is invited to discover truth about God and humanity. In Jesus, God discloses how adult, in the middle of our search for truth, are in danger of neglecting children's needs.

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<sup>42</sup> Thomas McCarthy, s. v. "vulnerare," *Inflected Digital Latin Dictionary for Students* (Perlingua Language Tools, 2011), 29073, Kindle.

<sup>43</sup> Jensen, *Graced Vulnerability*, 47.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

This section will focus on a theological anthropology of childhood and the child. It will also bring attention to the ongoing efforts of doing theology with children. Historically, much of the theology concerning children has dealt with issues of when they ought to be baptized, when they ought to receive communion, or how to effectively provide Christian education. These issues are important, but this project stresses the fact that there is something missing in theological reflection concerning children. Theological consideration must be given to the everyday lives of children and families, to the difficulties of growing up in a consumer-oriented society, and to challenges like neglect, violence, or abuse. New theological initiatives are needed in relation to these topics.

The fundamental value of childhood itself and of every child as fully human is a Christian theme that has been given renewed attention and expression through the development of child theology in the last twenty years.<sup>45</sup> There is an ongoing discussion about the meaning of child theology, and whether it is theology for children, about children, of children (that is, from children's perspectives), or with children. This discussion includes whether child theology also include practices of faith done together with children. The Norwegian scholar Marianne B. Gammelsæter asserts that a theology about the child will define and state the reason for a theology of the child.<sup>46</sup> This project will emphasize the contributions that each of these different approaches to child theology

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<sup>45</sup> Marcia J. Bunge, "The Vocation of Parenting: A Biblically and Theologically Informed Perspective," in *Understanding God's Heart for Children*, ed. by Douglas McConnell, Jennifer Orona, and Paul Stokley (Colorado Springs: Authentic Publishing, 2007), 65. Bunge contends that Keith J. White, Haddon Willmer, and John Collier, leaders of the child theology movement, have coined the term "child theology."

<sup>46</sup> Marianne B. Gammelsæter, "Barneteologi: En Teologi om og av Barnet," in *Barnet i Trosopplæringen*, ed. by Sturla Sagberg (Oslo: IKO-Forlaget 2008), 35.



can have for the protection and care of children. None of these ways of doing child theology could be done without genuinely listening to the voices of children.

A theology of advocacy for children of domestic violence needs to be founded on a theological understanding of the child. Theologian Marcia J. Bunge writes, “A strong theological understanding of parenting can only be articulated by cultivating a vibrant and complex theological understanding of children themselves.”<sup>47</sup> Bunge has written widely on the theme of children in the Bible, and her writings provide a strong theological reflection on children and childhood.<sup>48</sup> She emphasizes the fact that the conversation about the theological view of children and childhood is critical for the Church. Reading the Scripture in light of everyday challenges that children face will serve children, but this process may also bring about necessary renewal for the Church as whole. What children need is often what adults also need.

### The Value of the Child and Childhood

Every human being enters this world as a child created in God’s image with identity, purpose, and dignity (Genesis 1:27-28). The child is created in the image of God with the purpose and intention of glorifying God and sharing in God’s passion for the living—this view of the child should inform the relationships between adults and children. This is a solid foundation for the respect, care, and protection of every child in a

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<sup>47</sup> Bunge, “The Vocation of Parenting,” 53.

<sup>48</sup> For example, Marcia J. Bunge, ed., *The Child in Christian Thought* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2001), and Marcia J. Bunge, *The Child in the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008).

holistic perspective. It also should prevent the categorization of children in a way that misses the uniqueness of every child.

A theology of creation can serve as a strong foundation for the ministry of protection and care for every child in this world. It provides an open space for the Church to participate both on a local and a global level in common initiatives to protect the dignity of every child. When it comes to the community's shared responsibility of safety for children and the prevention of violence against them, the Church has something of value in its theology to bring to the table.

A theological view of children asserts that a child is fully human. Although no one would assert that children are not fully human, our attitudes toward children sometimes reflect such a view. Childhood is often viewed as a process of development, that is, as a stage on the way to the full and "real" life as an adult. This view is necessary for understanding the differences between the full responsibility of adults and the gradually increasing responsibility children are given as they grow. This developmental view of children also helps us recognize children's needs at certain stages in life, and the importance of providing for their biological, psychological, social, and spiritual development. But this view can also be dangerous if children and childhood are seen only through development lenses.

Childhood is not to be seen first and foremost as a stage on the way to being an adult. Childhood has value in and of itself. It is not a stage that should be put behind as a thing of the past once a person reaches adulthood. This view has become foundational within child theology. Often life is viewed in a linear perspective consisting of different stages we have to move through. We are always on our way to the next phase in our lives.

Children are treated as on their way to becoming mature. Childhood tends to be subordinated to adult life.

One of the most influential Catholic thinkers and theologians in the last century, Karl Rahner, challenged this way of interpreting life.<sup>49</sup> For him childhood did not only represent simply a stage in faith development. Rahner writes, “Childhood itself has a direct relationship with God. . . . Childhood then is not limited to a stage to be put behind as quickly as possible. It is enduring. It is part of our eschatological future.”<sup>50</sup> Childhood is a way to be with God, oneself, and others. It represents openness and vulnerability. Understanding childhood in this way provides a basis for listening to the child as part of the vocation of care and advocacy for children.

The value of children is not only related to the creation but also to the fall. They are not only gifts of the Creator as blessings to families and communities, but they are also instruments in God’s realization of his peaceful reign. Children are chosen by God for his purpose of bringing the creation back to right relationship. Jesus’ presentation of children as the greatest in the kingdom of God is both a parable for the Church to meditate on and a moral imperative to care for children in a Christlike way.

### Children as Victims and Agents of Sin

Several books and articles on the topic of abusive theology have been published in recent years. Miller-McLemore pinpoints the fact that many of these books generally

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<sup>49</sup> Many writers of child theology refer to Karl Rahner’s essay, “Ideas for a Theology of Childhood,” which was published in German in 1963. In many ways, he established a theological anthropology for doing child theology.

<sup>50</sup> Joyce Mercer, *Welcoming Children: A Practical Theology of Childhood* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2005), 150.

focus on recovery from a troubled childhood; they are not often written in light of the challenges of parenting.<sup>51</sup> This unilateral perspective might lead to an oversimplification of the relationship between doctrine and the abuse of children.

The idea of original sin has often been asserted in Christian homes to justify harsh treatment and punishment of children. But the idea in itself does not necessarily lead to this. Bunge in particular seeks to correct literature that overemphasizes the connection between the ideas of original sin and religious abuse.<sup>52</sup>

Until 2011 the liturgy of baptism in the Lutheran Church of Norway expressed that the child is born with the sin and guilt of the human race.<sup>53</sup> If the Church is too preoccupied with a narrow and individualistic understanding of sin and salvation, this saying could be understood as solely a description of the broken character of child. But the idea of sin speaks more about the condition every child is born into than the individual impact the fall has on every human being. It is about the whole brokenness of the creation.

Bunge calls for an expanded view of sin in an effort to provide for a theology of advocacy for vulnerable children. She writes, “Children are more often sinned against than sinners themselves.”<sup>54</sup> This should be reflected in theologies about sin. In many ways a Lutheran theology of sin has the potential for truth-speaking about sin in the

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<sup>51</sup> Miller-McLemore, *Let the Children Come*, 61.

<sup>52</sup> Bunge, *The Child in Christian Thought*, 16.

<sup>53</sup> Den Norske Kirke, *Gudstjenestebok* (Oslo: Verbum, 1996), 130.

<sup>54</sup> Miller-McLemore, *Let the Children Come*, 80.

relationship between children and adults. Children are sinned against and also fallible agents of sin.

The *simul iustus et peccator* (“simultaneously just and sinner”) theme challenges us to be aware of both the sinful nature and the holiness of every person and every church. It is among the paradoxes of faith that the Church, as individual Christians and as a believing community, is to be sanctified and yet marked by sin at the same. In light of this, the Church must be watchful of the use of power in relationships between adults and children.

Children of domestic violence often find themselves powerless in relationship with their parents. But to see children in general as powerless or simply as victims should not be the only way the Church should think about children. A theology of children needs to consider that children, although not equally with adults, have power that could affect their situation. The way of Jesus was to empower children. In our western world, there is a danger of romanticizing childhood and children and of making them a commodity. This focus contributes to the reality that children in need are often hidden.<sup>55</sup> Their situations should be brought into the light as they themselves are empowered.

While Miller-McLemore reminds us about the danger of robbing children of agency, she insists that corrupt behavior among children stands in direct proportion with the actions of the adults in their midst.<sup>56</sup> Very easily, a child can be labeled as

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<sup>55</sup> Pamela D. Couture, *Seeing Children, Seeing God—A Practical Theology of Children and Poverty* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 52-53.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

problematic, due to his or her inappropriate behavior, whether at school or in church. Seldom does one question the cause of a child's agitation.

In families where children are exposed to violence, the violent adult often blames the children for his or her actions. An essential part of the church advocacy for these children must be to speak out and say that the child is never to be blamed for adult's use of violence or lack of care. A theology of sin that does not account for the responsibility of adult sin against children is not good enough. This project hopes to encourage the Church to a moral inquiry on the issue of its responsibility of protection and care for children, asking, "What have you done to the least of these?" (Matthew 25).

### **A Theology of Family and Parenting**

In broken world, children need stable relationships, care, and protection. Often children receive this care and protection in their homes, but this is not always so. Many children experience their homes to be a rather unsafe territory. Not all parents are capable of sufficient parenting and need help. Some might need to share the task of parenting with someone else, or seek advice or counseling to break free from certain patterns or addictions. Others just need some support to start asking the right questions in order to better care for their children. This section focuses on developing a theology of parenting, which is critical for the goals of this project: to enable ministers and leaders of faith education to engage in a conversation with parents about the care, protection, and spiritual growth of children.

## The Vocation of Parenting

Bunge writes, “The church does not have strong teachings about parenting or children.”<sup>57</sup> This assertion is a helpful starting point for examining the Church in a Norwegian Lutheran context. Lately, much theology has been developed on the nature of the child, the task of doing theology with children, practicing faith with children at church, and the spiritual development of children. These insights have seldom focused on the everyday lives of children at home, or how to support parents in their attempts to practice faith and love with their children at home. This project will emphasize the need for educating parents regarding the impartation of a faith education that reflects a genuine respect for the child’s emotional and physical wellbeing and that is marked by genuinely listening to the child.

In Scripture, there are several expressions concerning the role and the vocation of parenting in terms of invitations to show care and to be gentle with the children. In Ephesians 6:4, the Apostle Paul writes, “Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.” In another place, the Apostle Paul invites parents not to “embitter” their children, “or they will become discouraged” (Colossians 3:21). To fail to provide for one’s family is considered a denial of the faith (1 Timothy 5:8). Although these expressions do not explicitly describe the characteristics of good parenting, they show that the Apostle Paul was aware of the power in the relationship between parents and children and the danger of abuse.

The importance of the family and parenting has been expressed from several spokespersons in the history of the Church. John Chrysostom, a fourth-century Christian,

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<sup>57</sup> Bunge, “The Vocation of Parenting,” 53.

called the family “the sacred community” or “the little church.”<sup>58</sup> The vocation of the parents was to introduce the child to the Bible, to pray with the child, to be good examples, and to practice care and love for one’s neighbor with one’s children. Chrysostom was particularly concerned about child neglect, which he counted as one of the greatest evils and injustices.<sup>59</sup> He viewed the seeking of material success as a hindrance to sufficient Christian care. Chrysostom’s theology of parenting is remarkably relevant in a market-driven time in which children are in danger of being treated as commodities and as the “possessions” of the parents.

A Lutheran understanding of vocation allows for the sanctification of the ordinary, everyday life. One of Luther’s accusations against the pope and the Church was the division between monastic life and the ordinary family life in the world.<sup>60</sup> For Luther, the sacred vocation should not be reserved for the life of monks and nuns. In a Lutheran church, there should be no question about the centrality of the vocation of parenting.

Luther spoke eagerly and joyfully about the task of parenting as a holy vocation. In the Christian call to love one’s neighbor, children are mentioned as the closest “neighbor” to their parents. Luther boldly proclaimed that good parenting fulfilled Matthew 25: “How many good works you have at hand in your own home with your child who needs all such things as these like a hungry, thirsty, naked, poor, imprisoned,

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<sup>58</sup> John Chrysostom, as quoted in Bunge, “The Vocation of Parenting,” 57.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Jane E. Strohl, “The Child in Luther’s Theology: ‘For What Purpose Do We Older Folks Exist, Other Than to Care for . . . the Young?’” in Bunge, *The Child in Christian Thought*, 139.



sick soul!”<sup>61</sup> For Luther, the home becomes the basis for care that goes beyond the family out to others in need.

Luther described fathers and mothers as apostles, bishops, and priests to their children.<sup>62</sup> He believed that the home was a central place of religious education, and he developed the small catechism to help parents cultivate Christian faith among their children. The family became the primary place of both faith and love education and formation.

Bunge states four primary tasks of parenting based on theological understanding of parenting and children.<sup>63</sup> First, parenting is about providing for the basic needs of children, not only for our own but also for poor children and orphans (Psalm 68:5). Second, parenting is about showing respect to, enjoying, and being grateful for one’s children. The Bible contains several stories where rejoicing over the birth of a child as a gift of God is central. Third, parenting is about nurturing children’s faith and helping them to use their gifts to serve others. Fourth, parenting is about listening to and learning from children. This is clearly about following Christ in his provocative practice of receiving children and making them models of faith. These four directives hold together two central theological dimensions concerning children: they are blessings of the Lord as gifts and as a labor of love.

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<sup>61</sup> Martin Luther, as quoted in Miller-McLemore, *Let the Children Come*, 101.

<sup>62</sup> Bunge, *The Child in Christian Thought*, 21.

<sup>63</sup> Bunge, “The Vocation of Parenting,” 55.

## The Child as a Gift and Labor of Love

Central to a theological understanding is the theme of children as gifts and as a labor of love. The notion of children as gifts and blessings is expressed throughout the Bible. Children are called “a heritage from the Lord” (Psalm 127:3), and in many of the stories in the Bible God’s promise is the blessing of having children (Genesis 1:22; 18:10; 1 Samuel 1:17).

Although children should be received as gifts and blessings, they also represent obligation and work. In Christian theology there should be dialectic between children as gift and task. When parents are able to receive and see their children as gifts, they are in the right position of giving good care.

The relationship between parents and children in reference to the idea of ownership is an important theological consideration. In Christian theology, children are gifts of blessing to the parents. They are “given” to parents in the sense that parents have a responsibility to care for and to protect them. But parents do not own their children like they own property. Miller-McLemore writes, “Children are not private property to be disposed of as parents would like.”<sup>64</sup> The idea of ownership needs to be countered by the command to care for and protect.

## The Extended Family

Children are not only the responsibility of their parents, but they are also the responsibility of the Church as a larger “extended family.” Miller-McLemore writes, “[Children] need a more generic kind of social mothering that extends well beyond

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<sup>64</sup> Miller-McLemore, *Let the Children Come*, 165.

biological mothers and depends upon willingness of non-biologically related adults to adopt children as primary responsibility.”<sup>65</sup> Similarly, Wayne E. Oates, in his chapter titled, “The Extended Family,” emphasizes the importance of the “extended family” for pastoral care.<sup>66</sup> In his view, some of the task of the Christian minister is to be a networker for suffering children. The extended family for a child could include grandparents, aunts, and uncles, but it could also be comprised of what Oates calls an “interprofessional extended family,” which includes persons from different professions.<sup>67</sup> Finally, he emphasizes an image of the Church as “the largest extended family.”<sup>68</sup> In light of New Testament expressions of the family and the parenthood of God (Mark 3:35; Ephesians 3:14-21), Oates writes the following about children: “They are not shut up to the suffocation of an unventilated nuclear family. God has other faces and forms in addition to those of mother, father, brother, and sister.”<sup>69</sup> The biblical vision of the Church as an extended family could serve to reduce the importance of and stress on the nuclear family.

This emphasis on the Church as an extended family must not simply be a theological idea expressed in written strategy documents. Rather, it should find concrete expression in the everyday life and ministry of the local church. It is hoped that this project will contribute to such expressions.

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Wayne E. Oates, “The Extended Family,” in *When Children Suffer*, ed. by Andrew D. Lester (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1987).

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 196.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 200.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 195.

## PART THREE

### PRACTICE

## CHAPTER 4

### GOALS AND PLAN

The purpose of this project is to increase awareness of and advocacy for children of domestic violence in two Lutheran congregations in the diocese of Borg in Norway. This chapter begins by presenting theological implications of the project. Then it gives a concretization of the main goals and describes a strategy and plan for reaching these goals. Finally, the target congregations and leaders are discussed.

#### **Theological Implication of the Ministry Initiative**

A ministry will, if not always explicitly but implicitly, reflect beliefs about God, the Church, and perceptions of humankind. In this first part of the chapter, the main theological implications of the project will be stated, which include: advocacy and care, children as fully human beings, children as part of God's mission, advocacy and care as discipleship, advocacy and care as part of the intrinsic nature of the Church, children as members of the extended family of the Church, and infant baptism as an opportunity for the Church to demonstrate care.

## Advocacy and Care

Derived from the story of God's self-revelation in the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus, it must be said that a credible, holistic, and theologically grounded *diakonia* includes both care and advocacy for the least. The triune God is compassionate. God suffers with and walks with those who are in need of advocacy. Christian awareness of and advocacy for children of domestic violence must include willingness and competence to care for them as well.

## Children as Fully Human Beings

A theological anthropology emphasizes that children are fully human beings. They should not only be seen as people who are on their way to becoming adults. They should be valued for who they are, created human beings in the image of God (Genesis 1:27). This project acknowledges the uniqueness and complexity of every child. It seeks to avoid one-sided view of children like sentimentalization, seeing children as innocent and pure, or demonization, seeing children as revealing the depth of human sinfulness. This project also avoids taking a unilateral development perspective of children, although this is important. The present time and moment of a child is deeply valuable, and looking at life and faith from a childhood perspective is something adults also need. Children are spiritual and moral agents, worthy of respect and attention.

## Children and God's Mission

The grand narrative of God's mission, as bringing back into right relationship the entire creation, challenges an adult-centered world. God's election of children for revealing the power of love and justice stands out as a remarkable characteristic of the

Christian faith. God seems to intentionally choose vulnerability before power. He chooses what is lowly and often counted as nothing in the eyes of those with earthly power (1 Corinthians 1:28). The election of children as the greatest in the redemptive rule of God testifies that God's way of salvation is the way of love and vulnerability, not of violence and dominance (Philippians 2:6-11).

This ministry initiative will not just be another task the local church should accomplish. But it should encourage the congregations for the task of missional imagination, asking questions about what God is doing at this particular time and place, and asking what it means to be church in light of God's redemptive rule. This could not be done without asking what is happening to our children in our community and to care for them. It is about finding children, finding God, and finding ourselves.<sup>1</sup>

#### Awareness, Care, and Advocacy as Discipleship

Care and advocacy for children at risk is a central part of Christian discipleship. It is about learning to obey what Jesus has commanded. A Christian disciple is "a person who learns the way of life that Jesus taught," asserts Pamela D. Couture in her book titled, *Child Poverty*.<sup>2</sup> The Great Commission underlines the fact that discipleship is about learning the way of Jesus (Matthew 28:19). Couture argues for the need for the development of spiritual depth as a foundation for a ministry for poor children, which she calls "renewing the apostolate for children and poverty."<sup>3</sup> This is in accordance with the

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<sup>1</sup> Couture, *Seeing Children, Seeing God*, 50.

<sup>2</sup> Pamela Couture, *Child Poverty—Love, Justice and Social Responsibility* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2007), 162, Kindle.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 175.

theological reflection in Chapter 3 of this project, in which ministry with children was discussed as central to the sending Church.

#### Awareness and Advocacy for Children as Part of What the Church Is

Craig Van Gelder stresses the importance of the interrelationship between three aspects of church life, stating, “The church is. The church does what it is. The church organizes what it does.”<sup>4</sup> The doings and the organization of the local church can be in opposition to what the church is. Hegstad writes, “For example, this can occur when the church becomes a hierarchy of those who rule and those who are subordinate, rather than a fellowship of equals.”<sup>5</sup> This happens when children’s voices are neglected in church. A rejection of children is a rejection of Christ. The local church should be a community where children are not recognized as secondary members who are on their way to becoming full participants, but rather fully fledged members of the community.

#### Children and the Church as an Extended Family

Children are not their parents’ property, but they belong to themselves and to God. Parenting is not something that solely belongs to biological parents, but it is a communal responsibility and obligation. In a broken world, children need to be cared for, protected, and given healthy boundaries. Children will need more than their parents, but the best way to care for children is often to provide care for their parents. This project emphasizes the perception of parenting as a communal responsibility and it seeks to discover ways to concretize such parenting.

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<sup>4</sup> Van Gelder, *The Essence of the Church*, 594, Kindle.

<sup>5</sup> Hegstad, *The Real Church*, 4189, Kindle.



## Infant Baptism as Practice of Care and Advocacy for Children

The centrality of infant baptism within the Lutheran theology and practice could probably not be overestimated. Baptism is first and foremost a sacrament, an act, and a place where God invites people to share in his abundant life. Baptism as a sacrament creates the Church. But the practice of baptism could also be seen as a practice of care and initiation. The liturgy of baptism, with its sayings, biblical texts, and symbols, highlights the responsibility for the child who is becoming part of the church, a people created by God who belong to each other. To understand infant baptism both as a starting place for creating awareness of children and as a concrete practice of care and advocacy for children is fundamental for this project.

### Goals

There are five primary goals of this project: to gain awareness of children of domestic violence, to respect children, to address children's questions about life and faith by implementing diaconal faith education, to advocate for children of domestic violence, and to promote dialogue regarding the care and advocacy of children. Each of these goals focuses on individual leaders in relation to children, but also on influencing and shaping practices of the local church in light of the challenge to prevent and stop domestic violence. To care for wounded children and to contribute to the prevention and cessation of violence against children is the overarching goal of this project.

### To Understand the Life and Struggles for Children of Domestic Violence

In children's ministry, leaders generally desire to receive children as fully human beings with their joy, struggles, hopes, and dreams. But the problem is that children who

suffer from neglect, abuse, or violence caused by their parents is often hard to discover at first. It is easy to treat children as a group of happy young people. The romantic view of childhood as a time of joy and happiness could also limit the capacity of adults to truly be aware of suffering children. A goal in this project is therefore to develop awareness of and understanding of the life and struggles of children of domestic violence and to be equipped to observe signals when something is wrong.

### To Respect Children's Feelings, Thoughts, Bodies, and Spirituality

The power of being received with respect and dignity cannot be overestimated. Children who experience physical and psychological abuse will often be watchful and extremely sensitive to the ways adults relate to them. Children need adult leaders who show kindness and respect. Christian adults need to create a safe space for every child's faith journey.

Trust is a fundamental phenomenon in human relations. A child who carries the secret of family violence would normally be very cautious about communicating his or her story. Children normally have a strong sense of trust, love, and loyalty to their parents.<sup>6</sup> This could hinder them from telling anybody that they are afraid because of what takes place at home. Kindness and respect for the child could provide the trust children need to communicate themselves to adults outside the family.

This project has a goal of enabling the art of respectful dialogue with children in church. The focus on creating a safe place for faith education will be stressed by focusing on how leaders can carefully listen and strengthen children's voices and beliefs in

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<sup>6</sup> Miller-McLemore, *Let the Children Come*, 158.

themselves. A genuine dialogue includes being sensitive to the children's feelings, body language and boundaries, thinking, and spirituality. Christian leaders must develop a high sense of ethical awareness about power in relation to children. Jesus' empowerment of children ought to serve as an example for Christian leaders.

Children of domestic violence carry experiences of emotional neglect. Their feelings have often been neglected, invaded, misunderstood, violated, prohibited, or suppressed. To acknowledge feelings in faith education is therefore critical. Being listened to with respect has power to strengthen one's self-confidence and self-acceptance. Children of domestic violence often have many experiences of being humiliated for their words and thoughts. Faith education is an arena with great possibilities for giving children experiences of respectful listening. Respectful listening includes attention to children's body language in addition to their words. Observation is crucial. Many adults can miss important cues when they only pay attention to what children are saying and neglect to notice other more subtle forms of communication.

Domestic violence violates the boundaries of the child's physical integrity. Some children have experienced the humiliation of their bodies through sexual abuse, spanking, kicking, hitting, pinching and the like. These children could have few experiences in which their bodies are shown respect. Children's ministry leaders must be aware of this and develop respectful ways of relating to children.

Finally, cultivating respect for children's spirituality is significant as well. Faith education should be marked by a genuine belief that every child has his or her own way of being with God and God has his own personal way of being with each child. Leaders

need to be aware of the dangers of religious abuse or the possibility of violating the spirit of the child in faith education.

#### To Develop Attitude for a Diaconal Faith Education with Children

A great contribution the Church could give to the work of preventing child abuse is doing theology with children and from their perspectives. Christian education and sharing the gospel with children has often been understood as communicating a message in a simple way that children can understand. Few efforts have focused on the contexts of children, on their questions, and on the process of meaning-making. With the national reform of Christian education in the Church of Norway, things are changing in this regard.

One of the three main elements in the *Plan for Christian Education in the Church of Norway* is about interpreting life and mastering the art of living. This document states, “Christian education must relate to the children’s and young people’s situation and communicate faith in such a way that they can understand their past and their present situations in light of faith in God.”<sup>7</sup> To accomplish such, the Church needs to discover the everyday questions, challenges, struggles, pain, hopes, and dreams of children in their community. This project will focus on developing attitudes for such a diaconal faith education with children.

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<sup>7</sup> Kirkeraadet, *The Plan for Christian Education*, 14.

### To Advocate for the Child of Domestic Violence

Suffering children who are brave enough to communicate their situation should be taken seriously. Children who communicate their pain to Christian adults outside their families should not be let down. When suffering children tell their stories to leaders in ministry, these children should be trusted and given the help they need.

Many adults who tell their stories about growing up in a violent home report that they tried to communicate their situation. This project emphasizes the importance of acting on reasonable suspicion of abuse of children. To express concern to a local child welfare agency could be a crucial step. The child welfare agency will be able to take action based on reports from different institutions and individuals who are in contact with the family or the child. This project has the goal of enabling leaders in the congregation to act on suspicion of domestic violence.

### To Facilitate Conversation about Care for and Protection of Children

A primary strategy of this project is to encourage the congregations to promote conversations about adult responsibilities for the care and protection of children. Enabling leaders for the task of open conversation is a goal. The theological view of children as God's children and as part of the Church as an extended family provides a foundation for this conversation.

This project will especially focus on the opportunity to address the issue of protection of children when priests meet with parents who bring their infants for baptism. During this meeting, priests should address the care of the child, the parents' own

childhood experiences, both good and bad, and what their wishes and dreams are for their children. This conversation will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 5.

### **Two Strategies: Education and Mentoring**

To reach the goal of this project, two interventions will be developed. The first is the education of leaders in the congregations' faith education and children's ministry departments, and the second intervention is the mentoring of priests. These interventions are connected and the mentoring presupposes participation in the education.

#### **Strategy #1: A Course for Children's Ministry Leaders<sup>8</sup>**

It is necessary from the start to establish a common understanding of the centrality of the ministry challenge. The suffering of children of domestic violence is a challenge for the whole Church at a global, national, and local level. It is a challenge for the Church as a spiritual and social body created to be a sign, foretaste, and a witness of the coming Kingdom of God. Participants in the course should be encouraged to imagine their role and ministry in light of the challenge to care and advocate for the suffering child.

This part of the course introduces theological reflection about the relationship between God's mission, the Church, and God as an advocate for the suffering child. This theological reflection will be connected with several important statements from various documents within the Church of Norway, such as the *Plan for Diakonia*, *The Plan for Christian Education*, and the new statements in the *Liturgy for Baptism* regarding care as

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<sup>8</sup> Appendix E will describe the content of the course.

a sacred responsibility.<sup>9</sup> Connecting theological reflection with these documents will establish a common ground for the ministry.

### **Safe Home—Children of Domestic Violence**

Understanding requires some knowledge. A part of the course will be devoted to questions about different forms of child suffering caused by parents or primary caretakers. It has been asserted that parents' emotional unavailability is the foundation for all kinds of abuse of children at home.<sup>10</sup> This assumption will be established as a starting point for understanding the dynamics and causes of violation of children's rights to feel safe at home.

Due to the theological underpinnings and goals for this project, the course will present children's own voices and stories. To be exposed to the stories children who have suffered from domestic violence and to reflect on these could create a new consciousness about children who suffer. This consciousness is not simply about knowing, but it is also about feeling and being available. The goal of increasing awareness should therefore focus on strengthening the leaders' sensitivity to children and their willingness to be emotionally available. This goal will serve as a guiding point in the election of methods for the course. Instead of starting with a definition of domestic violence, statistics, and naming the physical, psychological, sociological and spiritual damages such violence

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<sup>9</sup> Den Norske Kirke, *Plan for Diakonia*, (Oslo, Kirkerådet, 2007) , Den Norske Kirke, *The Plan for Christian Education* (Oslo: Kirkerådet, 2010), and Den Norske Kirke, *Liturgy for Baptism* (Stavanger: Eide Forlag, 2011).

<sup>10</sup> Kari Killén, *Sveket I: Barn i risiko- og omsorgsviktsituasjoner* (Oslo: Kommuneforlaget, 2009), 36.

could cause a child, the course will begin with listening to children's own words and body language.

The course will also present studies on the effects of domestic violence on children. Particular attention will be given to the challenges that domestic violence creates in regards to children's spirituality or capacity for transcendence, as well as their ability to connect with God, themselves, others, and creation

Finally, this part of the course will address questions about knowing what to do when a child communicates his or her secret about an unsafe home. How should the leader respond? What should leaders do when they have reasonable suspicion about abuse of children or domestic violence? What should teenage leaders in children's ministry do with information they discover? These and similar questions will be discussed.

### **Safe Leaders, Parents, and Caretakers—The Adult and the Child**

In Christian ministry with children, it is important for leaders to consider who they are as persons. In this section of the course, questions are addressed about the importance of self-awareness in relation to ministry with children. As leaders in children's ministry, it is not enough to be aware of children's thoughts, feelings, bodies, and spirituality, but leaders must also develop a strong self-awareness. This includes ethical and emotional dimensions, like awareness of the power an adult has in relationship with a child, and the fact that children need adults to be emotionally available. The significance of kindness cannot be overestimated.



## **Safe Space for Faith Journey—Theology with and for Children**

The final part of the course emphasizes the arena of faith education in the local church. It will seek to establish leaders' attitudes and introduce some knowledge and tools for a diaconal faith education. Participants are challenged to reflect on their ministry with children based on their knowledge of children of domestic violence. The participants will also be asked to reflect on particular examples of children's responses in connection with their participation in church. The examples represent both good and bad experiences.

The next step will be to introduce ways of doing theology or practicing faith with children in church in ways that respect their words, their thoughts, their bodies, and their spirituality. Examples of how leaders can facilitate a genuine dialogue and give freedom for children to choose within sessions of Christian education will be given. This section will also focus on the danger of wounding children's minds or spirits with religious ideas that reflect an image of a coercive God. Finally, the participants will be introduced to an article that introduces five guiding points that could serve as compass for assessing their own ministry with children in light of children's painful experiences.<sup>11</sup>

### **Strategy #2: Mentoring Priests for Conversations with Parents in Connection with Infant Baptism**

Before an infant baptism take place, traditionally the parents meet with the priest in the church the where the baptism takes place. Usually the priest visits the infant's home. A new practice has developed recently in many places, which is a gathering of

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<sup>11</sup> Torborg Aalen Leenderts, *Barnet og det vonde – et kompass for kristen trosformidling* (Oslo: Kristen Pedagogisk Forbund, 2010). Kristen Pedagogisk Forbund has developed what is called a "toolbox" for Christian education with children. This toolbox consists of fifteen different articles on Christian education for children. All the articles are accessible to download for no cost from [www.verktoykassa.no](http://www.verktoykassa.no).

several parents with the priests and leaders for Christian education or catechist. This has replaced the individual visit of the priest. The target congregations of this project have developed this very practice, and thus the project has focused this meeting. The project has also introduced the practice of an in-home visit by the priest some weeks after baptism as a time to follow up. This meeting focuses on faith education and care being part of the family's everyday life. This project introduces a written guide that addresses the issue of care and protection; this guide can be used in conversations with parents and in training priests for this task. The content of the guide will be given in the next chapter.

### **Infant Baptism as Practice of Care and Advocacy for Children**

The priesthood in the Church of Norway is well equipped for conversations about baptism as a sacrament, God's gift of grace, and initiation into the Christian fellowship. Theological reflection about the rite of infant baptism as a practice of care and advocacy is not necessarily highly developed among priests. In this project, it is therefore important to introduce reflection about baptism itself as an act of care and advocacy for the child. This project seeks to bring attention to a statement about care and advocacy for the child in the liturgy of baptism. By doing so, it is hoped that priests will be exhorted to engage parents in conversation regarding care and protection, and to advocate for children in public life.

### **Open Conversation about the Shared Responsibility of Care**

The training and mentoring will focus on how to facilitate an open conversation about the sacred and shared responsibility of care for the child. The mentoring of the priests will therefore focus on how to create a genuine dialogue with parents marked by

warmth, respect, and openness. The mentoring will also include reflection about goals and limits for the conversation. The purpose of the conversation is to challenge the parents toward increased awareness of themselves in relationship with their children as vulnerable beings, as gifts from God, and as a labor of love.

### **Target Congregations and Leaders**

This section discusses the criteria for choosing congregations for this pilot project. Within those congregations, leaders were also selected for the training/ mentoring. This section also reflects upon the aim of the project and who will profit from this project.

#### **Two Congregations in the Diocese of Borg**

The diocese of Borg was chosen due to its geographical nearness to *Diakonova*, the university college where the project is taking place. The choosing of congregations within Borg was decided in cooperation with the advisor for *Diakonia* as well as the advisor for Christian Education at the Bishop of Borg's administration.

The primary criteria were twofold: first, that the congregation had leaders that were motivated and willing to engage in the project, and second, that the congregation was part of the Christian Education Reform in the Church of Norway. This means that it has developed a local plan and received finances for a systematic Christian education for children from newborn to eighteen years of age. Congregations with more than one priest were preferred.<sup>12</sup> To delimit the project, only two congregations would be chosen.

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<sup>12</sup> The congregations that were chosen have three priests each.

## Teachers and Mentors

The group of people who will do the teaching, mentoring, and training in the project consist of employees from *Diakonova* University College and therapists from *Alternativ til Vold* (Alternative to Violence). The therapists will only take part in the mentoring of the priests. They have developed a written guide for the priests' conversation with parents about care and protection for their children.<sup>13</sup>

## Priests and Children's Ministry Leaders

At the start of the project, we asked who was especially in contact with families, infants, and small children in the ministries of the two churches. The answer was that those in closest connection were the priests assigned to the preparation for infant baptism and the leaders in the Christian education ministries. To involve the priests was important due to their role as spiritual leaders and coordinators of the ministries. To involve voluntary leaders, other church staff, and lay members of the local church council was also important, as the project emphasizes awareness of and advocacy for children of domestic violence not as an activity but as the essence of who the church is and what it does. The project emphasizes the necessary connection between teaching, liturgy/ worship, and *diakonia*.

## Infants and Families with Small Children

The project started based on the worries of how to reach and serve the very least, those who are the most vulnerable to domestic violence: infants. Based on knowledge of the vulnerability of children in the first three years of their lives and the serious damage

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<sup>13</sup> Appendix A provides an English translation of the guide.

that abuse causes to small children, the project has chosen to focus on infants and children between the ages of newborn to six years of age. There is a moral imperative for Christian theology and the Church to protect those who have little power to communicate their suffering. Even today, there is a strong sense of belonging to the Church of Norway among people in the community. The local churches have a great opportunity to reach many parents in the local community through the rite of infant baptism.

## CHAPTER 5

### IMPLEMENTATION PROCESS

This chapter gives a concrete description of the project and how it has been implemented in the target congregations. It will provide details regarding the structure of the project, the people who have been involved in the process of designing and accomplishing the project, and the additional support personnel. In the final part of the chapter, the plan of assessment and tools for evaluation will be described.

#### **The Pilot Project Summary**

Two interventions have been implemented as part of this project. The first is the education of leaders in the congregations' faith education and children's ministry departments. This has taken place in the form of a two-day course. The second intervention is the mentoring of priests related to their conversations with parents during the process of infant baptism. This has taken place in the form of three meetings between the project leaders from Diakonova and the priests and children's ministry leaders of the participating congregations.

## Two-Day Course

The education component of this project has taken place in the form of a two-day course. The first gathering was held at Diakonova in Oslo in March 2014. This gathering was only for church staff and the congregations' priests. The second part of the course was done locally in the congregation and was open to church staff, volunteers in children's ministry, and members of the local church council. This second day took place in September 2014. The topics and themes of the two gatherings in the course were similar but differed in level and methods. While the first gathering at Diakonova consisted of lectures and dialogue, the gathering in the congregations involved exercises and group reflections.

## Mentoring of Priests

The mentoring component of this project relates to the ministry of infant baptism and conversation between priests and parents both before and after baptism. This mentoring process involved three meetings between project leaders from Diakonova and the congregations' priests and leaders of Christian education. Session One involved observation of the congregations' meetings with parents before infant baptism, Session Two involved exercises at Diakonova, and Session Three involved feedback and reflection at Diakonova.

Both of the congregations involved in the project have recently developed a practice of gathering parents at church on a week day before the baptism of their infants is scheduled. The purpose of this meeting is to share information about the ceremony in the church, the theology of baptism, and the congregation's Christian education program

for children. As Session One, two of us from Diakonova visited this gathering in each congregation with the purpose of observation and dialogue with the priests and the leaders of Christian education after the gathering. Before our visit, the congregations were given a written introduction about the purpose of our observation and dialogue. The congregations were challenged to reflect on their practice of gathering parents before infant baptism in light of the purpose of our project.

Session Two was held at Diakonova with priests and Christian education leaders from the congregations. Other participants included therapists from *Alternativ til Vold* and personnel from Diakonova. This session included a full day of exercises related to integrating questions about care and parenting in a meeting with parents at their homes sometime after infant baptism. Ahead of Session Two, the priests received a guide with questions for the conversation of baptism developed by *Alternative til Vold*.<sup>1</sup> The day began with a short introduction to the activities planned, followed by role-playing exercises based on real situations. The participants played the roles of priests and the therapists and staff from Diakonova played the roles of parents. The session ended with dialogue and reflection in a large group.

Before Session Three at Diakonova, the priests carried out the practice of visiting and talking with parents after infant baptism. Five priests participated, and each one visited two or three homes each. At the session, the priests were invited to share their experiences of meeting with the parents. The session ended with an open dialogue

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<sup>1</sup> Appendix A contains an English translation of the questions in the guide developed by *Alternativ til Vold*.



between the priests, staff in the project from Diakonova, and therapists from *Alternativ til Vold*. The session was led by Tormod Kleiven, Director of Research at Diakonova.

### **Timeline**

This section will present the timeline of the project. The project began in 2013 and is almost complete at the time of this writing. All parts of the project itself have already been implemented, yet there are some elements of evaluation, analysis, and further research that have not yet been accomplished.

#### **Project Established: Spring 2013**

The vision for the project came as a result of a conversation between Maria Stensvold Ånonsen and Magne Torbjørnsen, during which we shared our common concern for children of domestic violence as a challenge for church and theology. In meeting with therapists Wenche Tobiassen Sanna and Øivind Aschjem from *Alternativ til Vold* in Porsgrunn, the idea of creating a diaconal project became more realistic. Based on a conversation with Tormod Kleiven, Director of Research at Diakonova, we decided to form a three-year Christian education project and apply for finances from the Church Council for the Church of Norway. In April 2013 we were given mandate and finances for a three-year project.

The work of designing the project started after receiving the allocation from the Church Council. In April 2013 we invited several people to a reference group at Diakonova. The group consisted of therapists, theologians, deacons, social workers, researchers, and advisors from the Bishop of Borg's staff. The group provided feedback after we presented the purpose and preliminary plan of the project. The Bishop of Borg

was contacted in the spring of 2013 regarding whether the project could take place in the diocese of Borg. This was followed by a meeting that included two members from Diakonova, Maria S. Ånonsen, the project leader, and myself, as well as three members from the diocese of Borg, the theological advisor to the bishop, the advisor for *diakonia*, and the advisor for Christian education. A work group and a management group for the project were established.

#### Project Document and Contract with Congregations: Fall 2013

The management group developed a project document. This document describes the organization, theoretical foundation, content, strategy, and plan for implementation. The process of finding one or more congregations for the project took place the fall of 2013. The contract with the congregations was signed in February 2014. The work of developing a course for the congregations was started.

#### Designing the Course: Fall 2013 and Winter 2014

The process of designing the course started the in the fall of 2013. I had the responsibility of leading this part of the project. In the process of planning the course, contact with the congregations was important so that the project itself would be executable. The work group and the management group were both involved in the process of creating the course.

#### Developing a Method for Baptismal Discourse: Winter and Spring 2014

The creating of a method or guide for including the topic of care and advocacy for children in the baptismal discourse with parents was a process that involved both the

therapists from *Alternativ til Vold*, the working group, and the management group. The therapists delivered a first draft in the winter of 2014, and this became the starting point for the final version that was finished in the spring of 2014.

#### Implementation: Spring and Fall 2014

Due to the priests' busy schedules, the two-day education course was divided into two parts. The first part took place at Diakonova in March 2014 and the second part was done in the congregations in September 2014. In the fall of 2014, the priests were gathered at Diakonova together with the therapists from *Alternativ til Vold* and the project's work group. The purpose of this session was to equip the priests for the task of including the topic of care and advocacy for the child in their conversation with parents in connection with infant baptism.

#### Evaluation and Analysis: 2015

The evaluation and analysis of the project will take place in 2015. Feedback evaluations, plenary conversations, as well as interviews of the priests and parents will provide the data for analysis. This analysis will be accomplished in the fall of 2015.

#### **The Project's Leadership and Structure**

Maria Stensvold Ånonsen and I, both assistant professors at Diakonova, have been the primary promoters and conductors of the project. We decided to organize the leadership of the project by establishing two groups, a work group and a management group. Other significant members of the project were the contact persons for the two congregations.

### The Work Group

The work group was established late in the spring of 2013 and consists of Tormod Kleiven, Director of Research at Diakonova University College; Maria Stensvold Ånonsen, Assistant Professor at Diakonova University College, and Magne Torbjørnsen, Assistant Professor and Student Minister at Diakonova University College. The work group has the responsibility to see that the project is actually carried out. Maria Stensvold Ånonsen is the administrative leader of the project, Tormod Kleiven is responsible for the research involved in the project, and I am responsible for designing the project's course. The group has met frequently throughout the project for discussion and to prepare case documents for the management-group.

### The Management Group

The project's management group was established late in the spring of 2013. This group is responsible for the quality of the project. A main task of the group has been to clarify the purpose, the theoretical framework, and the strategy content of the project. In addition to assessing progression, budget, and accounts, the group has also served as a resource group where issues have been discussed and given possible solutions. The management group will primarily handle the analysis of the project evaluations and the reflection regarding how to follow up. This group includes Tormod van der Hagen, Advisor of Christian Education in the diocese of Borg; Trine Klette, Associate Professor at Diakonova University College, Torborg Aalen Leenderts, Associate Professor at Diakonova University College (until spring 2014 when she retired); and the members of the work group.

To establish and maintain good contact both with the bishop's administration and the field of Christian education in Borg was of great importance for the project. We were therefore fortunate that the advisor of Christian Education in Borg, Tormod van der Hagen, became our main contact with the Bishop of Borg in the project and has been part of the management group. His position, knowledge, and contacts were extremely valuable in the process of choosing congregations and establishing contact with them. Also, in the process of evaluation, analysis, and assessment of the project's larger meaning for the Church of Norway in Borg, his participation is and will be of fundamental value.

To have experienced researchers and professionals from the fields of professional care and Christian education for children were also important. Two researchers from Diakonova were therefore asked to be part of the group due to their areas of research and interest. Trine Klette, who has a doctorate in the science of nursing, has focused on the problem of child abuse or misconduct of children by parents. In her PhD studies, Trine Klette studied the significance of consolation for development attachment in the first two years of infants' lives.<sup>2</sup> In addition, Torborg Aalen Leenderts is a recognized and much appreciated author of books that address questions of Christian faith and the experience of pain and suffering. She has been especially concerned about child theology and child-friendly Christian education.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Trine Klette, *Tid for Trøst: En undersøkelse av sammenhengen mellom trøst og trygghet over to generasjoner* (Time for Consolation: A Survey of the Connection Between Consolation and Safety over Two Generations) (Oslo: Nova Publikasjon, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> Torborg Aalen Leenderts was awarded with *Emmusprisen* in 2005 for her book, *Når Glassflaten Brister: om Brytninger mellom Livet og Troen* (When the Glass Plate Collapses: Refractions between Life and Faith) (Oslo: Verbum, 2005). Leenderts was also the lead teacher for an in-depth course at the master's

### Contact Person in the Congregation

Early in the project, it became clear that it would be necessary to secure effective communication between the leadership in the project and the congregations in the project. With this in mind, a contact person in each of the two congregations was determined. The contact persons have been responsible for transmitting and sharing information from Diakonova with staff and other persons in the two participating congregations. The contact persons have also been responsible for facilitating the second part of the two-day course in the congregations.

### Resources

It was also important to secure resources for the project such as facilities and written material. Both the congregations and Diakonova have suitable rooms for education courses. Based on advice from the congregations' leaders, we decided to run the second part of the two-day course locally in each congregation on a weekday evening. This was due to the fact that most of the participants would attend the course directly after work. For this reason as well, dinner was provided.

The course did not require the participants to read or write, but it provided the participants with some articles in hand-out format, as well as references to articles, books, Internet sites, and movies that could encourage further study on the topic. Participants were encouraged to read and work with their plans for ministry, the *Plan for Diakonia* and the *Plan for Christian Education* in light of the topic. As a pilot project, the

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level that she and I developed and taught at Norwegian School of Theology in Oslo. The course was called, "Det Sårbare og det Lidende Barnet som Utfordring til Teologien," which can be translated in English as "The Vulnerable and the Suffering Child as a Challenge to Theology."

congregations were not given a course booklet, but such a booklet will be developed for future implementation based on the experience, evaluation, and analysis of the project.

### **Assessment Plan**

This section will describe the assessment plan. There are several methods that are used to collect information regarding the value of the two interventions. Observations, questionnaires, conversations in plenum, and interviews are used. In this section, the different methods will be described under three headings: evaluating the course, evaluating the conversation with parents, and the final evaluation of the project.

#### **Evaluating the Two-Day Course**

The fact that a team of leaders from Diakonova was present during both sessions of the two-day course gave us the opportunity for observation during the sessions themselves. This observation included registering dynamics in the dialogue, questions from the participants, and general communication. In addition to these observations, feedback was taken after both sessions of the course, either verbally or via questionnaire.

After the first part of the two-day course, the contact persons in the two congregations were responsible for gathering the appraisal of the session from his or her congregation and sending this feedback to the project leader. The participants were asked two questions: first, to value the outcome in light of the goals of the course, and second, to state some expectations or wishes for the second part of the course.

Evaluation of the second part of the two-day course included both a group evaluation and individual evaluations, both of which took place onsite immediately following the session. At the end of the meeting, participants were gathered in groups to

share and provide feedback. Each group had a person who was responsible for taking notes. The evaluation questions asked for the following: 1) what new knowledge was learned or how they were newly aware; 2) whether the participants had any questions that were raised by the information presented; 3) what issues or topics the participants would like to learn more about; and 4) whether there were something they wished had been done differently.

While personal feedback is helpful, it is also critical to obtain feedback from participants in a venue in which they can remain anonymous. In individual anonymous feedback, participants are able to share their opinions freely without fear of being judged. In addition, being aware that the present theme of suffering children and domestic violence could evoke difficult feelings based on the participants' own life experiences, it was clear from the start that we needed more than a group evaluation. Every participant received a questionnaire via email in the week after the course. In the questionnaire, participants were asked to assess each part of the sessions in the course, but also to value the course in light of their own life experiences, faith, and ministry. From one of the congregations, a total of seven questionnaires have been received out of sixteen that were sent. From the other congregation, a total of nine out of twenty-three questionnaires have been received.

#### Evaluating the Mentoring of Priests for Infant Baptism Conversations

The evaluation of this part of the pilot project is not yet finished. The evaluation will include three steps and methods: a response and reflection in plenum with the priests



and the leaders of the project, a questionnaire sent to parents, and individual interviews with parents and priests.

In February 2015, the priests of the two participating congregations were gathered at Diakonova for a time of sharing their experiences with the project leaders. The priests were asked to share their experiences related to their contact with parents after infant baptism. The priests shared about the contact with parents prior to the home visit, the actual visits and conversations, and what has taken place after the visits in terms of following up or reflections made. Notes were taken by the project leaders.

The second step for evaluating this part of the project involves questionnaires sent to parents who have been visited by a priest. These parents have received anonymous questionnaires and have been asked to share their experiences related to the visit and to assess of the value of the conversation. Thus far we have received seven questionnaires out of ten that were sent out.

The final step will be individual interviews with some of the priests and some of the parents. The plan is to accomplish these interviews before the summer of 2015. The interview will be a semi-structured interview, which means that “it is neither an open everyday conversation nor a closed questionnaire.”<sup>4</sup> A semi-structured interview is conducted by using a prepared guide that is formed around certain themes and includes suggested questions.<sup>5</sup> The questions will not be strictly structured like a questionnaire, but the open questions will give the interviewee the possibility of saying what he or she

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<sup>4</sup> Kvale, Steinar and Svend Brinkman, *Interviews: Learning the Craft of Qualitative Research Interviewing*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2009), 27.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

finds important. The interview guide has already been assessed and approved by the work group.

In the interview guide for the priests, the questions will be structured around five themes. These themes include: 1) earlier experiences with conversations before and after baptism; 2) how the priest presented himself or herself this time; 3) how the priest presented the purpose of the visit and conversation; 4) a briefing about the use of the guide from *Alternativ til Vold*; and 5) the priest's experience of the visit and conversation. Finally, an open question will be given that allows the priest to talk about themes or reflections that he or she had experienced.<sup>6</sup>

The interview guide for the parents will be structured around six themes: 1) status, such as name, age, occupation, and number of children; 2) experience of having a newborn child; 3) opinion about the contact with the church; 4) reaction on the priests' inquiry about a visit and conversation; 5) a briefing about the questions in the guide from *Alternativ til Vold*; and 6) reflections and thoughts in the time after the visit. Finally, an open question will be given that allows the interviewee to add thoughts, themes, or opinions that he or she finds important.<sup>7</sup>

### Final Evaluation

The contact persons in the participating congregations will be asked to give a final verbal evaluation and assessment of the outcome of the project. This will take place via personal interview. A guide with questions will be developed and serve as a frame for the

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<sup>6</sup> Appendix B contains the English translation of the interview guide for priests.

<sup>7</sup> Appendix C contains the English translation of the interview guide for parents.

interview.<sup>8</sup> The guide will be structured around five themes: 1) an overall assessment of being part of the project, including quality of information, predictability, and the like; 2) expectations fulfilled or not fulfilled according to the invitation and presentation of the project; 3) the value of the project for the congregation's ministry with children and families; 4) the assessment of the project for the larger Church of Norway; and 5) an open question will be given that allows the interviewee to share reflections, opinions, or thoughts that he or she find important to communicate to the leaders of the project.

### **Preliminary Results and Plan for Analysis**

Certain aspects of the project assessment, including the final evaluation of the project as well as the interviews of the priests and parents, have not yet taken place as of the time of this writing. In this section, a brief summary of the findings from the questionnaires and group evaluations after the two-day course will be presented. A brief summary of the responses from the plenary session with priests will also be given. Finally, the analysis plan will be described.

### **Results and Assessment of the Two-Day Course**

The evaluation of first day of the two-day course was generally very good. The evaluation especially emphasizes two outcomes: first, increased awareness, sensitivity, and theological reflection about communicating the Gospel to children, and second, new knowledge about the theory of attachment. The dialogue that took place in the first part of

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<sup>8</sup> Appendix D contains a preliminary guide for the interviews with the project's contact person.

the course confirmed the fact that participants were growing in their knowledge and theological reflection about the Church and domestic violence involving children.

Following the second day of the two-day course, the participants were divided into groups at the end of the last session and were given a questionnaire. There were six groups, and we received all six group evaluations immediately following the day of training. All six groups mentioned increased awareness about the reality of suffering children as a result of the course. Several of the groups mentioned a desire for more concrete tools or methods for caring for and advocating for children.

Some mentioned that the group of people who attended the course was very mixed due to age, occupation, and relationship to ministry with children. This is challenge that needs to be considered if the course will be conducted in the future in other congregations. It may be wise to more clearly define the target group or to divide the training into two sessions, one that trains young leaders and another that trains adult leaders. We were encouraged by the congregational leaders after the first day of the two-day course to plan the second day to fit a large group of young leaders.

A relatively low percentage of the participants answered the questionnaire sent by email—only 43 percent from the first day and 39 percent from the second day. Those who answered were in general very positive about the outcome of the course. They scored the course high on two areas in particular. First, they indicated that they experienced increased knowledge about children who suffer from domestic violence, and second, they indicated that they grew in self-awareness related to who they are in ministry with children.

The question that scored lowest overall related to whether or not participants were given tools for conducting a safe Christian education. In the analysis of the work group, it was concluded that this particular question did not match what we did and intended to do in the course on the topic of developing a safe Christian education. The lessons on this topic focused on listening to children and respecting their thoughts and bodies; they did not attempt to introduce material that could be used when working with children who had suffered from painful experiences caused by their parents, such as relevant Bible stories or songs. In the future, the meaning of “a safe Christian education” needs to be clarified.

The length or extent of the course was another issue mentioned in the feedback from the participants. When we started the planning of the course, we had expected that it would be possible to run a longer course. While in contact with the congregations, it became clear that it would not be possible to run a course any longer than the two non-consecutive days. Due to the limitations of time, the work group decided to develop a course that focused more on increasing awareness and forming attitudes than on giving concrete information and resources to be used when working with children who suffer from domestic violence.

#### Preliminary Assessment of the Mentoring of the Priests for Conversation with Parents

At the time of this writing, additional material needs to be gathered before a final analysis and assessment of the mentoring of priests can be accomplished. The preliminary assessment by the work group and the therapists from *Alternativ til Vold* indicates that the mentoring and the guide provided the priests with the necessary tools to

test out the practice of visiting families after infant baptism. The interviews with the priest will most likely confirm and deepen this assessment.

Of the questionnaires sent to parents, seven have been received to date. In general they reveal a positive response. One of the couples appreciated the fact that the priest combined a genuine interest for the child with concern regarding the feelings and thoughts of the parents. Others emphasized that the conversation encouraged them to talk about their understanding of care. These responses underline the importance of the personal quality of the priest. To conduct this conversation, the priests need to demonstrate emotional availability. The responses from the parents indicate that the priests in the project managed to facilitate conversations where the parents felt challenged, embraced, and respected, all at the same time.

In one particular case, a priest reported visiting a family and having a hard time getting any sort of conversation to develop. In this case the priest showed respect and did not force the parents to talk, but shared with them a reflection about the task of care and the wellbeing of the child. This case brings to light the fact that sometimes it will be difficult to establish a dialogue. In this particular case, it is not possible to know why the parents did not respond to the reflections and questions of the priest. It could be that the parents are people of few words, but it could also well be that the topic of the conversation was difficult for them due to conditions present in the family, like intense conflict or violence. It is unlikely that the conversation between priest and parents will reveal whether or not the child is in any danger, but it will be a clear invitation to the parents to ask for help if they are worried about their ability to give the child sufficient care.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The purpose of this project has been to increase the awareness of and advocacy for children of domestic violence in two congregations in the Diocese of Borg through education and mentoring. A pilot project has been implemented and tested. Although this project has worked with only two congregations, the purpose has been to develop a diaconal practice that could become a model for other congregations as well.

This section will be structured under three headings. The summary will provide for a short presentation of the outcome of this project. The future plans will describe some of the next step that will be taken by Diakonova. Finally, a section on future perspectives will discuss some recommendations and implications for the larger Church based on the experience with and insights drawn from this project.

### **Summary**

This project is about listening to the voices of children of domestic violence and as the Church, responding with awareness, advocacy, and care. The project has heightened awareness of childhood suffering among the congregations' leaders. Some children are afraid because they live in a home with violence or abuse. The analysis of the project indicates that the course has heightened the leaders' capacity for sensitivity to such children and has helped these leaders to reflect about the possibility of advocating and caring for suffering children as part of ministry with children and families. This is promising.

Some of the participants of the course asked for more concrete tools. Particularly they asked for tools that could help them with what should be done when they find

themselves worried about the home situation of a child they work with in Christian education. The project's work group has acknowledged this request, but it has not yet been decided whether such concrete tools will be incorporated in the training. In the development of a diaconal practice, it is important not to seek tools for quick solutions without being willing to hear the voices and feel the pain of those who suffer. A ministry of advocacy and care for children of domestic violence should be based on a willingness to listen and learn from them as part of every Christian's call to walk humbly with God in this life. This project has therefore focused on genuine dialogue as part as a characteristic of Christian education with children.

The focus on tools could also be an expression of the fear of being responsible for the wellbeing of children. The general recommendation that has been given in the course is that if a young leader is worried about the wellbeing of a child, he or she should bring forth his or her worries to a responsible adult leader. The adult leaders should also not be afraid to approach the child about what is happening at home, and also to communicate concern to the child welfare department. In most cases, the child welfare department takes action when they receive several messages of concern.

The project has also tested out how the priests can implement advocacy and care for very young children as part of the ministry of infant baptism. The response from both the parents and the priests has been promising. In this summary, two effects of this practice will be mentioned—one of these was expected while the other was quite unexpected.

One of the hopes of this project is that it will contribute to the task of giving every child the opportunity to grow up in a safe home in which their God-given childhood



moments of joy, wonder, and trust are protected. It was expected that the conversation between parents and priest might have a positive effect on the relationship between the parents and the child. It was also expected that in some cases this conversation may reveal a situation that is damaging or potentially damaging for the child. In one of the cases in this project, a mother called the priest after her visit. She shared her worries about her relationship with her husband and about his behavior toward their child. The priest is following up with this particular woman. This became an example of how this practice creates a space for a parent to share her or his worries.

There was a second outcome of the visits of the priests that no one involved in the project had foreseen or anticipated. The Director of Research at Diakonova, who is conducting interviews with parents and priests in the project, has provided some preliminary reflections and summaries of the interviews with the parents. Without any prompting, the two couples he has interviewed so far mentioned that they were very touched by the genuine focus of the priest and the church related to the wellbeing of their child. They also mentioned that the conversation had brought them closer to approaching the faith and the message of the church. These couples could be described as belonging to the church foremost by tradition and not by belief.

In a missional church perspective, this is an interesting outcome. A genuine emphasis from the church on the child as a subject and an agent, and as one who is dependent upon the kindness, love, and sensitivity of parents and other adults, could also affect the faith journey of these parents. By using the child's name and encouraging the parents to imagine how the child experiences being part of the family, parents are feeling cared for and embraced by the church. This project has strengthened our belief that God

is at work in the everyday lives of people and especially in the care for the vulnerable child. The family is a sacred community or a “little church.” But this church should not be left alone; the child will need the extended family.

Some of the comments from the priests in the project indicate that the Church is still struggling with the separation between preaching the gospel and *diakonia*. In this case, *diakonia* is understood as the gospel in action as God’s love revealed through life and service of the Church. This project has emphasized the fundamental connection between the narratives of the Bible, Jesus’ life and ministry, and the Church’s awareness and advocacy for children of domestic violence.

### **Future Plans**

The interviews with parents and priests and the final evaluation of the project are yet to be accomplished. But based on a preliminary evaluation and analysis of the results of the project, this section will briefly describe three initiatives that will be taken going forward. These include the publication of articles based upon the results of this project, the publication of a resource booklet based upon the content of the two-day course, and an attempt to implement the project in other congregations in the diocese of Borg.

The first step involves the publication of articles based upon the results and analysis of this project. Six research articles, written primarily by researchers at Diakonova University College, will be written and included in an anthology titled, *Beskytt øyeblikket mitt* (“Protect my moment”). The anthology will serve as a contribution of the Church to the prevention of violence against children. Three of the articles will focus on the development of infant baptism as a practice of advocacy and

care. One of these three will generally discuss baptism in the Lutheran tradition as a practice of care, another one will present the material from the interviews with parents and the priests in the project, and that the third will do a practical theological analysis of the guide developed by *Alternativ til Vold*.

The second step that will be taken is to produce a resource booklet based on the content of the course and a presentation of the guide developed by *Alternativ til Vold*. The congregations have also been invited to contribute reflections about this project's topic and purpose in connection with particular gatherings within their Christian education programs. This will deepen the level of reflection for the congregations and also potentially lead to a further process of integrating knowledge and challenges from the course. Both the anthology and the resource booklet will extend the value of this project and make the insights available for the larger Christian community and the academic field.

The third step is that the project's work group will ask for an appointment with the bishop of Borg, his advisor for Christian education, and his advisor for theology. The results of this project are promising and it needs to be further developed and extended. The purpose of the conversation with the bishop and his advisors would be to focus on implications this project could have for the future plans and strategies of the diocese of Borg. It is hoped that the course and the practice of conversation with parents after infant baptism will be tested out in other congregations in the diocese of Borg.

## **Future Perspectives**

The Church of Norway finds itself in a time of rapid change. The relationship between the state and the Church has greatly changed. How this change will affect the relationship between the Church and the people of Norway is a great question. There are some tendencies that show a decline in infant baptism in the Church of Norway. The power of belonging to the Church by tradition may be weakened. This situation suggests that a new conversation must be had in the Church about the relationship between God's mission and the Church's *diakonia* with children and families.

The responsibility of preventing violence against children belongs to everyone. But the Church has a special opportunity and responsibility in the struggle for the wellbeing and protection of children. The Church administers symbolic rites of passage and other practices that offer opportunities for facing the problem of children of domestic violence in creative ways. The gospel story invites adults to embrace children in the name of Jesus. This project has shown that to embrace children, adults often need to learn to love the child within. Child neglect and abuse is often inherited in generations. The Christian gospel invites all human beings to embrace the child within and look at themselves as beloved children of God.

In the Lutheran Church, the sacrament of baptism and the practice of infant baptism represent an opportunity for connecting with parents at an early stage in the child's life. This project has contributed to the development of advocacy and care as part of the practice of infant baptism. The preliminary report on the results shows that the practice of visiting the home of the child after baptism could strengthen both the priest's and the parents' awareness of and emotional engagement with the child. It also seems to

be an important occasion with the possibility of a creating common theological discovery of the way of Jesus: “And whoever welcomes such a child in my name welcomes me” (Matthew 18:5).

This project has been part of a diaconal faith education project sponsored by the national council for the Church of Norway. The Church of Norway is at the beginning of an exciting time, and the reform of Christian education is among the greatest changes and opportunities the Church is facing. The hope of this project is that the development of systematic Christian education for children aged newborn through eighteen in the Church of Norway will not only provide good faith education for children, but will also lead to a radical learning for the entire Church to humbly walk in the footsteps of the greatest advocate for children, Jesus Christ, and to receive them like he did (Matthew 18:5; 28:18-20). In the middle of this practice, it is hoped that we will find ourselves embraced as beloved children of God.

## APPENDIX A

### Guide for Conversation with Parents

#### The First Period and the Child as Person

As parents you are important agents in your child's development. What you hold as valuable and important will affect (child's name).

Can you tell about ( child's name)?

\*Who is she/he?

\*Is there anything you experience as a special characteristic of (child`s name)?

#### Family, Network, and Interaction

Tell the child about the family he/she has entered. If you wish, you can speak directly to (child's name)

\*What do you want to characterize the family (child's name) has become part of?

\*What can (child's name) especially look forward to?

\*Are there any special challenges you think (child's name) will face in your family (siblings, conditions, etc.)?

#### The Child's Best

To receive and to give care is fundamental for us as human beings, and we all carry experiences of consolation and care, as well as the lack of consolation and care, of not being cared for as we needed. To protect the moment of the child is to see the child's need for safety and kind adults.

\*Which of your good childhood experiences do you wish (child's name) should experience too?

\*Are there any childhood experiences you do not wish (child's name) to experience?

\*For some children, the home could be an unsafe place to grow up in because of adult violation (high level of conflict, drugs, violence, sexual abuse, etc.). When we talk about this, do you have any particular thoughts?

### Expectations and Dreams

All parents have good wishes for their children. If we are going to sum up what we have talked about:

\*What are your hopes for (child's name)?

\*Is there anything that hinders you from accomplishing these hopes?

\*Do you need any support from others to achieve these hopes for (child's name)?

### Your Experience of This Meeting

If there is anything that comes to your mind after your meeting with the priest, you are welcome to ask for another meeting.

Parent's name.....

Priest's name.....

Place/Date.....

## APPENDIX B

### Interview Guide for Priests

1. Former experiences of conversations with parents in connection with infant baptism:
  - a. What is your experience of talking with parents in connection with infant baptism?
  - b. Which themes did these conversations address?
  - c. How did you experience these conversations?
2. How did you present yourself before the conversations with the parents?
3. How did you present the purpose and reason for this new conversation?
4. Briefing of the questions in the guide from *Alternativ til Vold*:
  - a. How did you formulate the questions?
  - b. How would you describe the responses of the parents to these questions?
  - c. To what extent did the conversation focus on the questions in the guide?
  - d. Which themes did the conversation address?
5. How did you experience this conversation?
  - a. Are there any issues from the conversations that you want to mention as especially challenging or fruitful?
  - b. To what extent do you think the meeting after infant baptism could strengthen the collaboration between the home and the church in sharing the responsibility of caring for the child?
6. Is there anything else you would like to say?



## APPENDIX C

### Interview Guide for Parents

1. State the following:
  - a. Names and ages of parents and children
  - b. Occupation/s
  - c. Your relationship to the church
2. How has your experience been of having a new child in your family?
3. Describe your experience of contact with the church in connection with the baptism of your child and the conversations with the priest.
4. How do you feel about having a meeting with the priest after your child's baptism?
5. Briefing of the questions and themes in the guide from *Alternativ til Vold*:
  - a. How did you experience the questions and themes that were introduced in the conversation with the priest?
  - b. To what extent were you asked about your own childhood experiences?
  - c. What significance do you think your childhood experiences have to the way you relate to your own children?
  - d. Did the conversation with the priest in connection with your child's baptism influence the way you think about your own childhood experiences and your role as parents?
6. Do you have you any additional thoughts about the conversation?
7. Is there anything else you would like to mention?

## APPENDIX D

### FINAL EVALUATION

#### CONVERSATION WITH CONTACT PERSONS IN THE CONGREGATIONS

1. To what extent has the project contributed to knowledge and awareness about life and faith challenges for children of domestic violence?
2. Are there any elements of the project that have been especially helpful?
3. Are there any special expectations you had of the project based on our presentation and invitation to be part of the project that were not fulfilled?
4. What do you think about the role of the church in the common task work of providing for the safety of children?
5. Do you have any thoughts or ideas about how you as a member of the church staff or congregation can continue the work of this project?
6. How would you assess the significance of the project for the Church of Norway?

## APPENDIX E

### COURSE: “PROTECT MY MOMENT”

#### DAY ONE – At Diakonova with professionals

##### Introduction (15 minutes)

- Listen to and appreciate the voice of children as vulnerable theologians – an example of a five-year-old child from gathering at church.
- Foundation of awareness, advocacy, care, and protection for the least
  - a) Care and protection as a shared sacred task for the church – Liturgy of Baptism 2011
  - b) Prevention of violation of children and care for children with experience of domestic violence and abuse as an important task in Faith Education – The Plan for Faith Education in the Church of Norway 2009 pages 16 and 30.
  - c) *Diakonia* as the gospel in action – and advocacy for the victim of violence – *The Plan for Diakonia in the Church of Norway* pages 7 and 23
  - d) Learning to receive children like Jesus did – Matthew 18 – “Protect My Moment” as part of Christian discipleship.

##### Session One: Attachment and Lack of Care or Mistreatment (75 minutes)

- The importance of care for development, trust, and safety
- The connection between childhood mistreatment and adult illness
- Introduction to *Attachment Theory*
  - o A - Safe attachment
  - o B - Anxious-avoidant attachment
  - o C - Anxious-ambivalent attachment
  - o D – Disorganized attachment
- Perceptions of Mistreatment and Abuse of Children
- Different kind of Mistreatment
- Factors of Risk at Parents
- Parents’ damaging behavior
- Signs and symptoms of neglect or mistreatment
- Summary

##### Session Two: How to Take Responsibility for Our Own Feelings of Powerlessness (45 minutes)

- Between power and powerlessness – children at risk

- Boundaries – to respect and to acknowledge boundaries
- Power and responsibility – power as something we practice
- The child's power and powerlessness
- Parents' and leaders' power or powerlessness – the importance of work on your own childhood experiences
- To be responsible for your own feelings of powerlessness
- Three questions for reflection:
  - a) How can I as parent or leader take responsibility for my powerlessness so it does not lead to misuse of power?
  - b) How can I discover another person's misuse of power over children?
  - c) How can I care for children who have been exposed to misuse of power by their parents?

#### Session Three: Focus on Sharing Christian Faith with Children (60 minutes)

- Vulnerability as gift of Creation – our responsibility for children and their parents
- Vulnerability as helplessness, risk, and shame
- Vulnerability as gift of Creation – trust and openness as expressions of life; Knud Løgstrup, *The Ethical Demand*
- Childhood qualities – being open, listening and asking questions, being present in the moment, etc. In this position of vulnerability, they are more easily wounded.
- Question for reflection – What is the essence of what I want to share with children (Faith Education)?
- The Catechesis of the Good Sheppard – some examples of attitudes and experiences
- The child's precious trust in God and our responsibility – speaking truthful images of God and truthful perception of life
- Loyalty towards the Bible or the traditions of sharing the faith with children; confronting conventional faith sharing
- Moving from thinking about what children can endure to thinking about what children need
- Children who have lost their trust in adults
- Children can lose their trust in God – example: "A Child's Letter"
- The adult as a model for the image of God or for the relationship with God
- A Compass for faith-sharing with children
- Reflection and questions

#### DAY TWO – in the congregations with voluntaries and professionals

Time for eating and talking together

#### Session One: When Home is not Safe – About Violation/ Mistreatment of Children at Home (45 min)

- Question for reflection (couples) – What is home?
- About violation of children – use of pictures and sayings

- a) Psychological Violence – “Dad tells me that I’m hopeless and that I shouldn’t have been born. I don’t understand why dad says it, but he is dad. (The child thinks he/she is hopeless, and doesn’t know if she/he will live anymore.)
- b) Physical violence – “Mum hits me or yanks me when she is angry. I am afraid but I tell nobody. Maybe I deserve to be hit.”
- c) Sexual violence/abuse - My grandfather comes to my bed in the night and touches my body. He says I must not tell anybody. (The child thinks he/she will never tell anybody.)
- Some children are living with a huge sense of pain or woundedness
- Violation or abuse of children is something that is difficult to talk about (secret pain/experience)
- What happens to children who are violated or abused? (internalization or externalization)
- Quotation from novel written by Maria Parr in 2009 which expresses that adult wrongdoings are never the child’s fault
- What can we do when we are worried about a child?
  - a) Take your worries seriously
  - b) Share your worries with an adult you trust
  - c) Report worries to child welfare
- A story – Letter from Mattis - 9 year old – his father hits him
- Group exercise – write a brief response to Mattis

Session Two: Who am I in relation to children? – Self-perception as possibility and challenge (45 min)

- Reflection together in couples – “Who can I be with children?”
- Self-perceptions and blind spots – happenings + working on it = experience
- We all are dependent on others to discover who we are
- Exercise in couples: a) Use three words to describe yourself; b) Describe the other when you see him/her.
- Illustration :Johari`s Window - revised version – God knows
- Roles and Responsibilities
  - a) Power to do good
  - b) Responsibility to use power for good and not for evil
  - c) See and be seen

Session Three: Safe Faith-Sharing for the Most Vulnerable Children, Ages 0-6 (45 min)

- Introduction: children of domestic violence – a hidden suffering

- What children of domestic violence need in Faith Education is what all children need
- Contributing to a safe space for exploring the Christian faith
  - a) At home: “the little church” – the child’s primary place
  - b) At church
- Three characteristics of safe faith-sharing with the most vulnerable children – Relation, Dialogue, and Respect
- Relation – Focus on the relationship between God and the Child
  - a) Child spirituality – “the way God is with children and children are with God” – quotation Rebecca Nye. Reflection in plenum: “Has God a special way to be with little children?”
  - b) The time of life between the ages of 0 and 6 is a special time for falling in love with God – insights and examples from *The Catechesis of the Good Sheppard* (Sofia Cavaletti)
  - c) Small children do not need everything at once – asking for what the child needs
  - d) Jesus’ attitude towards and relationship with children should especially inform the process of choosing form and content in Faith Education with small children
  - e) Reflection in groups: Reflect on the expression of a child, “Sometimes I think that God loves everybody but me”
- Dialogue – exploring the faith together with children
  - a) Why dialogue and what is genuine dialogue?
  - b) Christian dialogue with children includes listening to the child and God
  - c) Listening not just to words but to bodily expressions
  - d) Observation: The most common fruit of the Holy Spirit is a deep joy
- Respect – for children’s bodies, feelings, and thoughts
  - a) Do not force children to speak
  - b) Create a safe space where the setting and boundaries are clear (explicit description)
- Practicing faith with children in a child-spiritual-friendly way could have a formative and transformative power upon both parents and children. It could influence the everyday interactions between parents and children in a positive way.
- Assertion to discuss: Christian education can contribute to safe homes!

Evaluation in Groups (15 min)

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